The Art of Railing: Knowledge and Satire from Skelton to Shakespeare

by

Tristan Alexander Samuk

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that satire, or more specifically “railing,” provided the writers of the English Renaissance with a means of making epistemological change perceptible through poetry. Chapter 1 traces the beginnings of railing in John Skelton’s satiric attacks on Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, arguing that the paradoxes and inconsistencies of Skelton’s poems are an attempt to explore how the centralized Tudor state was turning reason into a decentralized political force that could both legitimize and resist the truth claims of the ruler. Chapter 2 examines the verse satires of John Donne, in which Christian figuralism allows Donne to see individual morality as something involved in larger social and economic forces. In “Satyre 3,” railing becomes a way to articulate a problem that arises from the Christian-figural viewpoint: how can you discern the true religion if historical forces emanate from everything and everyone? Next I turn to Edmund Spenser, whose satiric poetry in The Shepheardes Calender, Mother Hubberds Tale, and The Faerie Queene interrogates the emerging gap between human thought and the natural world. Spenser uses the limitations of satire and complaint, with their focus on the world as it is, to gesture at a higher possibility for poetry that imagines how the world could or should be. The final chapter examines how Shakespeare’s As You Like It expands on the socially transformative promise of art that Spenser depicts in The Faerie Queene. Jaques, the play’s satirist, tries to use
the descriptive methods of natural philosophy as a model for curing the corruption of the world, but this approach ends up preventing him from imagining any alternative. Jaques, however, is a poet as well as a natural philosopher, and the poetry of his railing gestures at another form of truth that he himself is not entirely conscious of. This truth turns out to be the conditional truth of the aesthetic, the virtue of “if” that Rosalind uses to imagine a new life for the exiles in the Forest of Arden. Satire may not be able to change the world, but it makes it possible to imagine a kind of art that can.
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This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Adrienne Samuk, and grandfather, William Bothwell.
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1 Do We Still Care about Satire?

For a few weeks in 2015, satire was front-page news. In January, two Islamist gunmen attacked the offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, killing many of its best-known cartoonists. The gunmen claimed to be avenging the honour of the Prophet Mohammed, whom the magazine had depicted in a number of controversial cartoons. One of the most interesting things about the response to the attack was the way the victims were described in the Western media. Almost universally, they were referred to as “satirists,” rather than simply cartoonists or humourists. In much of the reporting, the idea of satire became a means of arguing that *Charlie Hebdo* was something more than just provocative entertainment. When its cartoonists made fun of Mohammed, they were rejecting everything that Islam holds absolute and, at the same time, affirming their own absolute support for free expression. In the West, describing the slain cartoonists as satirists was a way to frame them as martyrs to secular, democratic truth.

Nevertheless, in an editorial comic for *The Guardian* titled “On Satire,” the graphic novelist Joe Sacco didn’t hesitate to denounce *Charlie Hebdo*’s provocations as vapid and opportunistic. Turning the satire back onto the magazine itself, Sacco’s comic shows how easy it is to be pointlessly offensive: one panel depicts a black man falling out of a tree while holding a banana, and the next shows a Jew counting his money in the entrails of the working class. Sacco’s argument is that creating these kinds of images doesn’t require much intelligence or bravery. “Yes, I affirm our right to ‘take the piss,’” he insists, “But perhaps when we tire of holding up our middle finger we can try to think about why the world is the way it is.” For Sacco, the cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo* fell short of what satire is supposed to be about: knowledge, the question of how things got this way. In their case, that question would encompass, among other things, the Sykes-Picot agreement, the legacy of French colonialism in Algeria, and the endemic discrimination that Muslims continue to live with in modern France. A cartoon that asks such a question would be making an entire history perceptible.

Satire figured prominently in the coverage of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks because, as Sacco suggests, it has a strong association with the question of historical knowledge. That hasn’t
always been the case, however. Although satire originated in the ancient world, the kinds of questions that Sacco is talking about weren’t being asked until the early modern period. The sixteenth century is a key moment for satire because it’s the origin of many of our current ideas about what a satirist is supposed do. In the sixteenth century, satire became an aesthetic means of asking questions about the link between historical and epistemological change. When John Skelton attacked Cardinal Thomas Wolsey in *Collyn Clout* (1523), he wasn’t just adapting the conventions of medieval complaint to slander Wolsey as an irrational tyrant. He was also using satiric poetry to explore the effects of political and social change on the definition of reason. For Skelton and later poets of the English Renaissance, satire was a way to show that knowledge has a history, and that its history is still unfolding.

2 **The Knower**

During the Renaissance, new cultural and religious movements profoundly altered what it mean to know something, and the satirists of the period responded by using poetry to make these epistemological changes perceptible. Satire, or more specifically “railing,” became a way to articulate the confusion of living in a world with multiple irreconcilable standards of theological, historical, and even natural truth. In the process of making knowledge change visible, satire participated in an early modern rethinking of poetic imagination as a special kind of knowledge distinct from what the observable world could provide. When we read sixteenth-century satire, we’re seeing the beginnings of our modern ideas of art.

The view of poetic imagination that emerges from early modern satire in many ways resembles Jacques Rancière’s theory of the aesthetic. In Rancière’s work, the word “aesthetic” refers to two different things: a “regime” that he primarily associates with post-Romantic artists and writers, and a special kind of “experience” that isn’t necessarily limited to any one period in the history of art. These different versions of the aesthetic, the regime and the experience, are essentially two ways of thinking about the breakdown of the boundary between art and life. Rancière doesn’t think it’s useful to see art simply as an ideological mystification of elite power. Instead, he’s interested in how art imagines new ways of living and, as a result, creates an opportunity for actual change to occur.² He argues that art offers a way to see that certain aspects of the world in which we live—inequality, exploitation, repression—are neither necessary nor eternal. Such an experience creates a momentary sense of “autonomy” that allows the viewer to critique and
historicize his own social experience. This is part of what Rancière terms a “politics of aesthetics,” or “metapolitics,” a revolutionary moment of self-education in which a work of art inspires a change in the real world that politics alone might not have been able to effect.³

Rancière’s idea of aesthetic experience is, in many ways, a more historically grounded version of what Immanuel Kant calls an “aesthetic idea.” In The Critique of Judgment, Kant says that aesthetic ideas are representations that have an ineffable quality to them and that, through imagination, seem to “strive toward something that lies beyond the bounds of experience.”⁴ An aesthetic idea doesn’t just depict a thing; it expands or alters the viewer’s understanding of that thing by introducing new imaginative connections and provoking “much thought.”⁵ Poetry is the ultimate medium for aesthetic ideas because poetry is, in Kant’s words, “the art of conducting a free play of the imagination as if it were a task of the understanding.”⁶ Unlike rhetoric, which tries to control the reader’s thinking with persuasive language, poetry can use nonliteral or ambiguous language to open up new possibilities for thought. “The poet,” Kant says, “promises little and announces a mere play with ideas; but he accomplishes something worthy of being called a task, for in playing he provides food for the understanding and gives life to its concepts by means of his imagination. Hence basically the orator accomplishes less than he promises, the poet more.”⁷

The sixteenth century is the moment when it first became possible to think about poetry as Kant and Rancière do: as a creation of the human mind that discloses intellectually and historically transformative knowledge. In England, the most influential argument for poetry as knowledge was Philip Sidney’s Defence of Poetry. In the Defence, poetry supersedes all other studies because it’s the only form of human knowledge not bound to the task of describing things as they are: “Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like: so as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit.”⁸ Poetry ranks above such “serving sciences” as history and natural philosophy because the poet is free to leave the real world behind and engage in what Sidney calls “the divine consideration of what may be and should be.”⁹
There’s a strong Aristotelian element to Sidney’s understanding of poetic knowledge, especially his assertion that the poet links the “general notion” with the “particular example.” But Sidney’s emphasis on a difference in kind between poetry and other forms of knowledge is also a sort of mirror image of what would eventually be called scientific thought. At the same time that natural philosophers were beginning to suspect that language and imagination needed to be kept out of the study of nature, poets like Sidney were considering the aesthetic implications of what is essentially the same conclusion—that true knowledge depends on preventing nature and imagination from interfering with one another. This distinction between imaginative and natural knowledge is, as I argue in more detail below, what makes Kant and especially Rancière’s aesthetics possible. To put it another way, Sidney’s idea of poetic knowledge, the knowledge of the way things should or could be, isn’t an escape from history; it’s the very possibility of thinking historically. The imaginative qualities of poetry allow readers to see their own time and place from a perspective that might not otherwise have been possible, and, most importantly, open up the possibility of critiquing and changing those circumstances.

As Sidney argues, all poetry has the potential to alter the world by altering its readers. Few forms of poetry, however, are as explicit about their interventionist goals as satire. Yet the angry moralizing that satire is known for is only the most obvious and, in my view, least interesting manifestation of this impulse toward change. The important thing in an early modern satire isn’t the argument it makes about virtue and vice, but the questions, problems, and contradictions that it raises through poetry. Seeing satire as poetry, rather than a disguised form rhetoric or history, is absolutely essential to understanding why early modern writers were intrigued by satire, and why their satires are still worth reading.

Two moments from Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* will help illustrate what I mean. In Act 1, Ulysses blames the failure of the Greeks to capture Troy on their loss of respect for authority. Nestor agrees, adding that Patroclus and Achilles have been setting a bad example by shamelessly mocking Agamemnon, and now Ajax too “rails on our state of war.” The worst raider, however, is Thersites, “A slave whose gall coins slanders like a mint,” and who’s encouraged by Ajax “To match us in comparisons with dirt, / To weaken and discredit our exposure” (1.3.192-194). Thersites is dangerous because he’s a poet as well as a slanderer, and his attacks are like “coins” in the sense that they use “comparisons” to create equivalences between things that should never be compared. When Thersites rails, he does something much
more serious that simply insulting the Greek leaders: he uses poetry to challenge their basic assumptions about the world. Thersites’ comparisons allow his listeners to imagine that there’s no such thing as “degree,” the self-evident hierarchy that, according to Ulysses, keeps the world from collapsing into chaos (1.3.82). If Thersites is right, anything and everything can be compared, and Agamemnon is no better than a slave.

Despite the power that Nestor attributes to him, Thersites himself is quite pessimistic about the efficacy of railing. “I’ll learn to conjure and raise devils but I’ll see some issue of my spiteful execrations,” he says (2.3.5-6). It’d be easier to learn black magic than to persist in trying to change the world with satire. But why does Thersites bother if he can’t produce results? Consider his conversation with Achilles and Patroclus. Hoping to hear Thersites make fun of the other Greek commanders, Achilles prompts him with a question:

ACHILLES. ... Come, what’s Agamemnon?
THERSITES. Thy commander, Achilles; then tell me, Patroclus, what’s Achilles?
PATROCLUS. Thy lord, Thersites. Then tell me, I pray thee, what’s Thersites?
THERSITES. Thy knower, Patroclus. Then tell me, Patroclus, what art thou?
PATROCLUS. Thou must tell that knowest.

(2.3.40-47)

“I am Patroclus’ knower,” Thersites finally says, “and Patroclus is a fool” (2.3.50-51). Thersites is a “knower,” and railing is how he comes to know. Even if he can’t do much to change the Greek heroes, he can still expose their emptiness and corruption. “I will begin at thy heel,” he tells Ajax, “and tell thee what thou art by inches, thou thing of no bowels, thou!” (2.1.46-48). The technique that Thersites uses to accomplish his debunking is, as Nestor called it, “comparison.” Later in the play, for instance, he mocks the entire justification for the siege of Troy by comparing King Menelaus to a series of miserable animals such as “a dog, a mule, a cat, a fitchew, a toad, a lizard, an owl, a puttock, or a herring without roe” (5.1.58-60). Beneath their aristocratic facade, that is, the Greek nobles are simply beasts.

Shakespeare’s Thersites is an exemplary figure for early modern satire. As Nestor points out, the poetic aspects of his raillery allow him to interrogate the truth claims of his targets. Being a poet makes him a knower, someone who can use imagination to expose Ulysses’ hierarchical view of the universe as an idea that depends on the contingencies of wealth, power, and violence. But Thersites also knows that satire alone can’t change things. What it can do, however, is create other “knowers” by showing Thersites’ readers that the way things are isn’t necessarily the way
they have to be. His goal isn’t to solve the problems of his culture, but to use satiric poetry to make those problems knowable.

3 Rhetorical Masks and Historical Particulars

My emphasis on the importance of poetic imagination to sixteenth-century satire is grounded in my experience of what it’s like to read these incredibly complex texts. However, I’m also responding to the way that satire has traditionally been studied by literary critics. Since the 1940s, satire has been seen as rhetoric, or as history, but almost never as poetry. When Cleanth Brooks proposed that the language of poetry is the language of paradox, he began by asking his readers to forget the kinds of paradoxes they might have seen in satire. On the first page of *The Well Wrought Urn*, Brooks says that paradox has a bad reputation as “the language of sophistry, hard, bright, witty ... We may permit it in an epigram, a special subvariety of poetry; and in satire, which though useful, we are hardly willing to allow to be poetry at all.”

Even critics with a genuine interest in satire have tended to treat it as “useful” rather than artistic. My view, by contrast, is that satire is a poetics means of asking questions about how history shapes what counts as knowledge. If we fail to read these texts as poems, that is, we fail to read them altogether. I’ve already provided a preliminary sketch of this idea through a reading of Shakespeare’s Thersites, and the details will become clearer when I outline my readings of Skelton, Donne, Spenser, and Shakespeare. First, however, I want to survey how past critics have interpreted satire, both to highlight the differences in my own approach and to acknowledge what I’ve taken from the existing scholarship.

In a 1944 essay “The Nature of Satire,” Northrop Frye articulates some of the basic assumptions that came to dominate satire criticism in the middle of the twentieth century. Whether it’s a poem by Juvenal, or a few isolated moments in a modern novel, Frye says that a satire always contains some degree of “wit or humour” and a clear “object of attack.” Frye claims that satire does the opposite of what literature normally does: instead of exploring fictions, satire is bent on destroying anything that stands in the way of truth. Satire is “poetic imagination in reverse gear,” or “poetry assuming a special function of analysis” in order “to bring one to the point at which one can escape from an incorrect procedure.” Satire seeks to argue, to convince, to distinguish the good from the bad, and to replace the false with the true. To the extent that satires use the
formal and imaginative tools of poetry, they apply them in the service of predetermined truth rather than open-ended exploration. A satirist, Frye argues, is a rhetorician disguised as a poet.

In the 1950s and 60s, a circle of scholars associated with Yale University developed a body of scholarship on satire that Dustin Griffin has dubbed “the consensus.”18 The work of this group, which included, among others, Maynard Mack, Martin Price, Alvin Kernan, Robert C. Elliott, and Ronald Paulson, varied widely in emphasis and approach. Yet, like Frye, they all saw the satirist essentially as a rhetorical stance, a conventional disguise that writers use to engage in a battle between virtue and vice. The Yale circle was important because their focus on form and rhetorical effect opened up new ways of reading satire that didn’t depend on history or authorial biography. They made it possible to read satires without having to decode whom or what was being attacked.

One consequence of the Yale circle’s eschewal of history for rhetoric was a tendency to see satire purely in terms of its practical purposes. Paulson, for instance, defines satire as writing that “imitates, presents, explores, analyzes the evil,” but at the same time makes the reader conscious of “a pointing finger … that refers beyond the page to his own life.”19 Although Paulson titled his book The Fictions of Satire, imagination doesn’t factor into his analysis. “Satire’s purpose,” he says, “is not to create something new but to expose the real evil in the existing.”20 Robert Elliott saw satire in even more functional terms. In The Power of Satire, he argues that satirists are the descendants of prehistoric priests and shamans who used magical incantations to drive evil from their communities, and that in literate cultures these rites of purification were replaced by the punitive power of raillery.21 Elliot’s satirist is even less of a poet than Paulson’s; he’s a figure that predates literature and ends being absorbed and preserved by it.

Cleanth Brooks anticipated attitudes like those of Paulson and Elliott when he observed that satire is “useful” but not really poetry. For them, as for Frye, satires were closer to sermons than sonnets. The Yale circle’s resistance to reductive historical and biographical readings led them to the opposite mistake of treating satire as though it had no history at all, as though its characteristics remained the same irrespective of time and place. An early exception was Alvin Kernan, whose 1958 book The Cankered Muse dealt exclusively with the satire of the English Renaissance. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Kernan begins from the proposition that satire isn’t just persuasion or truth-telling, but “an art … a construct of symbols … put together to
express some particular vision of the world.” And while Kernan agrees that the satirist is a conventional persona, he also asserts that the satirist’s persona has changed over time. This is especially apparent in the Elizabethan period, which had a idiosyncratic understanding of the satirist thanks to a mistaken but influential theory that satire evolved from the ancient Greek satyr play. In Elizabethan England, Kernan observes, a satire was thought to be a poem in which “the author playing the part of the satyr attacks vice in the crude, elliptic, harsh language which befits his assumed character and his low subject matter.” Another strength of Kernan’s study is that framing the satirist as a persona doesn’t prevent him from making nuanced distinctions between individual satirists. He demonstrates that Elizabethan satire had certain conventions, but he also shows that poets like Marston, Rankins, Jonson, and Shakespeare each used the satyr persona in their own way.

Outside the Yale group, other critics were trying to bring history back to the study of satire. This resurgence of historically informed criticism was centered at the University of Chicago, and found its most influential expression in the work of Sheldon Sacks, A. R. Heiserman, and Edward Rosenheim. Rosenheim’s *Swift and the Satirist’s Art* (1963) provides one of the clearest statements of their approach. Satire, he argues, is a spectrum running from the persuasive to the punitive. Persuasive satire is very close to rhetoric; it exposes and explores evil through complex argumentation. Punitive satire, meanwhile, is mainly concerned with punishing people in entertaining ways. Both kinds of satire use fictions, but these fictions depart only slightly from literal truth: “All satire is not only an attack; it is an attack upon discernable, historically authentic particulars. The ‘dupes’ or victims of punitive satire are not mere fictions. They, or the objects they represent, must be, or have been, plainly existent in the world of reality; they must, that is, possess a genuine historic identity.” Rosenheim doesn’t collapse satire into rhetoric, but he’s not quite willing to call it poetry. There are limits to how much fiction a satire can contain because the reader has to be able to figure out who or what is being attacked. Unlike other poets, the satirist has to keep his imagination on a very short leash.

When theory and new historicism began to transform literary studies in the 1970s and 80s, it became increasingly difficult to defend the kinds of claims that had characterized the work of both the Yale and Chicago critics. Scholars working on satire turned away from defining the genre and decoding targets and instead restricted themselves either to surveying ancient and early modern theories of satire, or, more often, to discussing satire in the context of the work of a
Although there have been very few book-length studies of satire since the late 1960s, two in particular are worth mentioning. The first is Frederic V. Bogel’s *The Difference Satire Makes* (2001), which rejects the old idea that satire takes a clear position against a target and argues instead that satire actively produces the differences it seem to take for granted. Bogel characterizes the instigating moment of all satire as an encounter between the satirist and “something or someone that is both unattractive and curiously or dangerously like them, or like the culture or subculture that they identify with or speak for, or sympathetic even as it is repellent—something, then, that is not alien enough.”

Bogel makes satire into something more than just an argument about predetermined vices and virtues. Satire becomes a form of writing that actively intervenes in the world by trying to create, or at least sharpen, the difference between good and evil.

Although Bogel is more recent, the best book on satire published in the last twenty-five years remains Dustin Griffin’s *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (1994). Griffin outlines four ideas that shaped the twentieth-century critical consensus about satire: 1. satire works through a binary of praise and blame; 2. satire depends on a standard against which to measure deviations; 3. satire appeals to orthodox values; and 4., like a priest or rhetorician, a satirist tries to persuade his audience to be virtuous. Griffin points out an obvious fact that few critics have been willing to concede: none of these assumptions accounts for the actual complexity of satiric writing. In proposing an alternative view, Griffin holds onto the notion that satire is essentially rhetoric, yet he also argues that the rhetorical purpose of a satire is more open-ended than that of a sermon or political speech. Rather than seeing satire as a means of arguing for predetermined truths, Griffin says that satire is partly a “rhetoric of inquiry.” When a satirist writes, he writes “to discover, to explore, to survey, to attempt to clarify.”

The meandering chattiness of Horace is the archetype of this kind of open-ended inquiry, but the approach also appealed to Renaissance writers like Thomas More and François Rabelais. For Griffin, satire is rhetoric, but it isn’t rhetoric in service of the truth. It’s a rhetorical means of figuring what the truth is.

My approach to satire has been informed by some of the criticism I’ve outlined here, in particular Kernan’s account of the satyr persona and Griffin’s notion of satire as inquiry. I differ from previous critics, however, in two main ways. First, I don’t believe that the best way to understand satire is to see it as rhetoric. It’s certainly true that satirists use techniques derived from rhetoric and oratory, but, as Nestor says of Thersites, the main thing that distinguishes the
The satirist from a run-of-the-mill slanderer is the way he uses figurative language to interrogate the truth claims of his targets. In oratory, figurative language is usually used to clarify or explain a point. When an early modern satirist speaks figuratively, more often than not he introduces even greater complexity and ambiguity into his argument. If anything, the rhetorical aspects of satires make them harder, not easier, to understand. That’s because the satirists of this period aren’t rhetoricians; they’re poets, and as poets their writing doesn’t seek to communicate a predetermined truth. Instead, satiric poets use fictions to open up new ways of seeing truth itself as something to be questioned. Previous scholarship has reduced the number of ways in which we can read satires. In this study, I try to expand the interpretive possibilities of satires by connecting treating them as what they are: complex products of the human imagination that explore problems rather than reduce them to false coherence.

The other difference in my approach is that I see knowledge, rather than morality or religion, as the fundamental preoccupation of sixteenth-century satire. When writers like Skelton, Donne, Spenser, and Shakespeare turn to satire, they explore what it means to know the truth in a world in which the very definition of knowledge is changing. During this period, Protestants, humanists, and experimental natural philosophers did something far more than reject old views of God, man, and nature. They also rejected the methods that Catholics, scholastics, and Aristotelians had been using to support their most basic truth claims. Satire’s obsession with truth made it highly sensitive to these epistemological changes, even when their implications were still unclear. Throughout this study I connect satire to the insights about early modern knowledge that have emerged the work of historians of science like Lorraine Daston, Steven Shapin, and Peter Dear, because, as I’ve suggested, the rethinking of scientific knowledge in the sixteenth century also involved a rethinking of the epistemological status of poetry. None of the poets I examine had made up their minds about the transformation of knowledge taking place in their culture. Through imaginative fictions, they were trying to make to possible to perceive and interrogate this transformation as something historical.

4 Separation and Convergence

When I use the word “knowledge,” I don’t just mean a particular group of sixteenth-century texts about nature, history, or theology. I also mean something deeper: the unspoken assumptions that governed the production of texts in virtually every field of study. But because these assumptions
were in a state of flux for most the early modern period, I also use the word “knowledge” to refer to competing perspectives on what constituted legitimate methods of study in a number of fields, but in particular the discipline of natural philosophy. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault calls these assumptions the “positive unconscious” of knowledge, the self-evident rules that establish what it means to know something and determine the accepted methods for studying various kinds of phenomena. Foucault’s view of European thought as a succession of different epistemological fields or “epistemes” has influenced much of my thinking about how knowledge changed during the early modern period. The primary insight I take from Foucault is that late sixteenth-century thinkers were beginning to embrace difference rather than similitude as the best tool for studying the world. Instead of looking for imaginative links between things, natural philosophers began to emphasize observable variation. One of the foundational assumptions of the new science was that the truths of language and imagination aren’t the same as the truth available through direct perception of nature, a distinction that led the study of nature to become increasingly detached from the study of texts. To put it another way, the shift that Foucault identifies is also the beginning of a disciplinary split between the sciences and the arts. Bruno Latour’s distinction between modern and premodern thought is another way of framing this change: in premodern thought, the natural and human worlds were understood as a kind of gradient, while in modern thought the natural and the social have to be kept apart.

The narrative of separation popularized by Foucault and Latour has been especially influential in recent studies of the links between Renaissance literature and natural philosophy. Mary Thomas Crane, for instance, argues that the Scientific Revolution severed man’s “intuitive” link with nature. As old techniques were challenged or exposed as inadequate, many European thinkers began to feel that the surface of nature was no longer a reliable index to its deeper secrets. Another way to describe the shift is to use Katherine Eggert’s concept of “disknowledge,” the sense that a particular theory or discipline is somehow both knowledge and non-knowledge, true and false at the same time. Thanks largely to Foucault and Latour, the story of the emergence of science is usually understood by literary critics as a story of disjuncture or separation. In the field of science studies, however, many of the most influential accounts of the Scientific Revolution argue the opposite: in order for experimental science to achieve legitimacy, the boundary between the natural and the artificial had to be erased. It’s important to understand how these narratives of convergence and separation fit together, because their intersection
demonstrates that the Renaissance rethinking of science also involved a rethinking of imagination.

For most of the early modern period, there was no such thing as “art” but rather “the arts,” a group of disciplines that included things like painting, poetry, and music, but also geometry, astronomy, and mathematics. “What characterizes the period,” says Paul Oskar Kristeller, “is not only the quality of the works of art but also the close links that were established between the visual arts, the sciences and literature.” According to Kristeller, it’s anachronistic, however, to call these connections “links,” since they have less to do with crossing a boundary than with the fact that the boundary between the arts and sciences didn’t exist in the way we currently understand it. In the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, science was the study of natural bodies and their causes.

Disciplines that studied quantities, like mathematics and geometry, or artificial phenomena, like rhetoric and painting, were excluded from the Aristotelian conception of science. With them went the other great enemy of pre-modern science, historical particularity. Aristotle argues that direct sensory experience is the basic source of knowledge about nature, but he also insists that no one sensory experience can possibly reveal how nature works. Understanding the universe meant understanding how things happen most of the time, and therefore rare or singular occurrences had to be viewed with scepticism. This distrust of particularity also intersected with the rejection of artifice: using special tools or techniques to produce singular effects wasn’t considered a reliable guide to the everyday operations of nature.

One of the basic assumptions of Aristotelian science was that thinking was the basic tool for achieving absolute knowledge of nature. Starting from generalized sensory experiences, the natural philosopher would use logic to work his way upward through a chain of causes and effects. Sixteenth-century natural philosophy had no way to integrate observations derived from what today we would call an experiment, an account of a specific event that, as Dear puts it, “acts as a warrant for the truth of a universal knowledge-claim.” Many accounts of the early history of science revolve around the question of how experiments, with their technical sophistication and emphasis on particularity, came to displace logic and generalization as the basic procedure of knowledge production. Lorraine Daston has argued influentially that scientific facts have their origins in the “preternatural,” strange events that defy ordinary explanation. As both Protestant and Catholic authorities began to treat supernatural claims with greater scepticism, many purported miracles were demoted to the status of the preternatural and
explained away as conjunctions of natural and demonic causes. Gradually, natural explanations began to outweigh the demonic, which led natural philosophers to take an increasing interest in these rare events. There is a direct line, Daston argues, between the naturalizing of preternatural wonders and Francis Bacon’s experimental program, which not only dissolved the distinction between unique occurrences and general truths, but also assumed that all phenomena, whether natural, artificial, or preternatural, are products of the same basic forces.42

Bacon is a central figure in many of the classic accounts of the Scientific Revolution as an intellectual movement that transformed the practical world, a narrative associated in particular with the work of Edwin Burtt, Herbert Butterfield, and Alexandre Koyré.43 And yet Bacon has also been an important figure for historians trying to uncover the origins of science in the practical world of artists and craftsmen.44 Bacon, that is, is a very flexible figure. Without question, he played a major role in legitimizing experiment and induction. But his writings also display a lingering habit of universalization that, at times, is reminiscent of the techniques he claims to reject. As Dear points out, Bacon tends to describe “what happens” when experiments are performed, rather than “what happened” in one specific experiment.45 As Paolo Rossi and others have argued, Bacon was in many ways a Renaissance thinker attempting to reform what he saw as a flawed philosophical tradition. The Novum Organum helped to lay the intellectual foundations for experiment as a knowledge practice, but Bacon’s emphasis on experience and induction isn’t a prefiguring of eighteenth and nineteenth-century scientific thought.46

The key moment for scientific particularly didn’t occur until Robert Boyle’s pneumatic experiments in the 1650s and 60s. Boyle’s published accounts of his work provoked a critical response from Thomas Hobbes, who, though not an Aristotelian, questioned the value of knowledge extracted from isolated situations.47 Rather than presenting his results as absolute knowledge, however, Boyle claimed instead that they were “matters of fact.” With this distinction, Steven Shapin observes, Boyle drew a crucial boundary around “the domain of the factual, separating it from those items which might be otherwise and from which absolute and permanent certainty should not be expected.”48 Boyle believed that the truth of a fact depended on the agreement of a community of observers, and therefore social and literary technologies were just as important to his scientific program as the air pump he designed. His strategy for multiplying his observers depended on what Shapin calls “virtual witnessing”: the use of lucid writing and detailed illustrations to produce an image of the experiment in the reader’s mind, an
image so clear that it made direct observation unnecessary. In Boyle’s work, artifice and particularly finally become essential to the production of scientific knowledge. In short, it took a very long time for European thinkers to accept that artificial, singular events counted as knowledge about nature. The reason it took so long is that the implications of dissolving Aristotle’s art-nature distinction needed time to become apparent through the kinds of social and literary technologies that characterized the work of Robert Boyle and the other members of the Royal Society. But, to return to the initial question, how does this narrative of convergence fit with the narrative of separation favored by Foucault, Latour, and others? And what does that tell us about poetry?

To put it concisely, these narratives describe two different aspects of the exact same change. Mary Poovey observes that one requirement for the emergence of the scientific fact was the notion that observation and interpretation were not the same thing. “The modern fact finally emerged as a theorizable component of knowledge production only as an effect of two related developments in the history of epistemology: what looked like or could be presented as the complete separation of observed particulars from theories, and the elevation of particulars to the status of evidence capable of proving or disproving theories.” Separating particular events from their place in bigger theories was also an attempt to separate the world of phenomena from the world of human thought, a distinction that ran counter to the methods of Aristotelian science. Human thought alone was no longer a legitimate tool for studying nature. It had to be applied to particulars, and, as Bacon argued, it had to be disciplined into observing those particulars correctly. Like Descartes, Bacon attempted to theorize a “scientific self” through exclusion.

He didn’t try to do away with subjectivity completely; instead, he argued that mental distortions like imagination are external to the impartial “core self” that observes an experiment. The laboratory became a place where the natural absorbed the artificial, but also a place where human thought had to be carefully guarded from merging with nature.

At the level of material objects, then, it’s accurate to characterize the Scientific Revolution as a convergence between the human and the natural. The legitimacy of experiment was grounded in a new belief that manmade circumstances could produce natural effects, since both natural and artificial objects are ultimately subject to the laws. The Scientific Revolution also, however, completely excluded culture, language, personal history, emotions, and imagination from its
model of a scientific self. Their importance came after the fact, as Boyle’s literary technologies demonstrated. Importantly, the implications of this exclusion reached beyond natural philosophy. By erecting a wall between nature and human thought, early modern science did two things at once: it defined itself, and it also created a new way for poets and artists to think about the epistemological value of fictions. For them, the idea that imagination deals with a kind of knowledge completely distinct from knowledge of the observable world wasn't discrediting, but empowering. It’s precisely this rethinking of knowledge that underlies the complexity of the period’s satires. Imaginative fictions provided a means of depicting and thinking through the implications of living through a period of major epistemological change.

5 The Meaning of Railing

How exactly did sixteenth-century satirists accomplish this? How did they interrogate change as it was occurring? They did it by using a special kind of poetic logic called “railing.” We take it for granted that railing describes a satiric attack, but this sense of the word didn’t exist before the Tudor period. Prior to the 1480s, the verb “rail” meant a number of very different, even contradictory things. Railing could describe painful things like bleeding or weeping, and it could also mean the act of beautifying something or fastening it with ribbons. It could mean the act of regulating and enclosing a space, but it could also describe the act of wandering beyond a regulated space. The word had a peculiar ability to evoke things that were held in, tied up, and kept in line, as well as things that flowed out, escaped, and wandered. It was only in the last decades of the fifteenth century that “railing” acquired its satiric sense. It’s not clear how this shift in meaning occurred, but the OED suggests that it resulted from the word’s similarity to the Middle French verb railler, to boast or to mock. This new sense quickly became the dominant English meaning of “railing,” though it didn’t completely displace the word’s older senses. For the period’s writers, railing primarily meant mocking or attacking, yet it also suggested simultaneous submission to and rebellion against order. The word itself was a contradiction, and it became a model for the articulation of larger historical and cultural contradictions, a means of capturing the uncertainty and ambivalence that accompanies first-hand experience of historical change.

My first chapter traces the beginnings of railing in two of the period’s earliest verse satires, John Skelton’s Collyn Clout and Why Come Ye Nat to Courte? Both poems attack Cardinal Thomas
Wolsey, Lord Chancellor and *de facto* head of the English church in the early 1520s. In *Collyn Clout*, Skelton’s everyman speaker “rayls” bitterly against Wolsey’s ecclesiastical mismanagement, all the while deflecting responsibility for his criticisms by attributing them to what “all men say.” When the people rail, he suggests, they defend truth and order from the whims of dangerous tyrants like Wolsey. And yet railing poses almost as big a threat to England as Wolsey’s greed. Throughout the satire, Collyn alternates between broadcasting the people’s raillery and demanding that Wolsey stamp out all dissent. This is the question that *Collyn Clout* struggles with: in an absolutist state ruled by an irrational pseudo-king, who has the authority to define “good reason and good skyll”? In the poem’s sequel, *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?*, Skelton explores this question further through the concept of the “commonwealth,” the collective interest of those excluded from power in the absolutist state. For Skelton, the commonwealth represents an alternative standard of rationality that can denounce Wolsey as a tyrant without the threat of anarchy that haunted *Collyn Clout*. Skelton’s satires spend plenty of time insulting Wolsey, but it’s a mistake to read them simply as personal attacks. When Skelton rails against the cardinal, he’s trying to understand how political change engenders epistemological change, how the centralized Tudor state has led to the emergence of reason as a decentralized political force that can evaluate, legitimize, and potentially reject the truth claims of the ruler.

Chapter 2 examines the verse satires of John Donne, which are some of the first true neo-classical verse satires in English. Donne’s targets, like those of Roman satire, are people shamelessly addicted to vice. But Donne also does something unprecedented in classical satire: he treats the vices of individuals as matters of history as well as matters of ethics. Donne’s understanding of ethics is highly influenced by the Christian figural view of history, the notion that every person, object, and action, no matter how mundane, is part of the unfolding of salvation. In Donne’s satires, figuralism serves as a model for considering how the moral choices of individuals are wrapped up with larger historical forces like economics, class, state power, and divine grace. Even as Donne mocks his targets, he also shows that their identities are shaped by and, in turn, shape their world. In “Satyre 3,” Donne produced his most sophisticated exploration of the implications of figuralism for knowledge. In this poem, “railing” becomes a way to articulate a problem that arises from the Christian-figural viewpoint: how can you choose the true religion, the one that isn’t just a historical accident, if everything and everyone appears to be
involved in God’s plan for the world? The railing of “Satyre 3” never arrives at an answer. Instead, Donne’s point is to show that railing makes it possible to ask the question.

Next I turn to Edmund Spenser, whose satires consider a very different epistemological problem from Skelton or Donne: the emerging gap between human thought and the natural world. Spenser’s poetry responds to the loss of what Mary Thomas Crane calls an “intuitive” connection to nature. As the experimental methods of early science began to displace the old theories of natural philosophy, European thinkers began to feel that nature had suddenly become illegible to existing techniques. For Spenser, this new distance between nature and human imagination was an aesthetic opportunity, and in his poetry illegibility and deferral become a way of gesturing at higher truths not available to natural philosophy, and much of Spenser’s satiric writing dwells on the disastrous effects of continuing to believe that nature and imagination are contiguous. When nature and human thought, or, by extension, real experiences and poetic fictions, aren’t sufficiently distinguished, it become virtually impossible to discern the truth, a problem Spenser expresses in The Shepheardes Calender and Mother Hubberds Tale by oscillating between satire and complaint. Spenser’s ultimate complaint about the epistemological error of mixing nature and imagination occurs in Book 1 of The Faerie Queene, when Satyrane and Sansloy clash over Una. Satyrane defends the truth, but, like all satirists, he’s closely tied to world of experience, and his railing ends up making him indistinguishable from his evil opponent. The problem with railing, Spenser suggests, is that it can show what’s wrong with world, but it can’t imagine how things could be different—in other words, satire may be poetry, but it isn’t poetic enough. Spenser offers a glimpse of hope, however, in Una’s subsequent encounter with Arthur. In the image of the golden dragon that crowns Arthur’s helmet, Una sees both a reminder of dragon terrorizing her kingdom and a prefiguring of how the world will be redeemed when the dragon is slain by the Redcrosse knight. As a work of art, the dragon offers Una an experience of the future that satire and complaint could only hint at.

My final chapter examines how Shakespeare’s As You Like It expands indirectly on the promise of art that Spenser depicted in Arthur’s helmet. Jaques, the play’s satirist, tries to use the descriptive methods of natural philosophy as a model for understanding the corruption of the world, an approach that prevents him from imagining any alternative. Jaques, however, is both a poet and a natural philosopher, and the poetry of his railing gestures another form of truth that he himself is not entirely conscious of. This truth turns out to be the conditional truth of the
aesthetic, the virtue of “if” that Rosalind uses to imagine a new life for herself and the other exiles in the Forest of Arden. Over the course of the play, Rosalind and Jaques play out a schism within knowledge itself. Nature becomes the domain of the sceptical natural philosopher, while imagination becomes the responsibility of the poet and the dramatist. The elaborate masque of the final scene suggests that art really can change the world, and yet Jaques’ lingering scepticism reminds us that imagining a different world doesn’t necessarily bring it into being. Even as Shakespeare looks ahead to an epistemological regime in which art is more powerful for being separated from science, Jaques’ railing demonstrates that this new model has its weaknesses as well.

Spenser and Shakespeare posit poetic imagination as a way beyond the impasses of railing. By registering problems and contradictions poetically, the satiric railing of Skelton and Donne renders the relationship between history and knowledge perceptible. Their railing uncovers a new epistemological potential in poetry that was only just becoming thinkable, a potential that Rancière would term “the aesthetic.” But railing alone isn’t enough to bring about new life through imagination. Railing, as Spenser and Shakespeare suggest, is only the first step towards fulfilling the promise of a new model of poetic knowledge. In both the *The Faerie Queene* and *As You Like It*, satire sets up a problem that is addressed by the greater imaginative freedom of drama and literary romance. When satire succeeds as poetry, it shows that knowledge has both a past and a present; when it fails, it gestures at how other forms of poetry might imagine the future. But in order to see how satires succeed and fail, we have to read them in ways that bring their complex and confusing aspects to the fore rather than attempt to reduce them to consistent moral, political, or religious positions. In satire, railing isn’t an obstacle to meaning. Railing is the meaning.

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3 This scenario, which Rancière labels “art becomes life,” is the first of three different examples of the politics of aesthetics. The second is “life becomes art,” in which the content of a work of art is actual history rather than the potential for a different kind of society. The last is a scenario in which “life and art exchange properties,” which is the Romantic view that everyday objects, whether natural or manmade, can disclose meaning about the world. Rancière argues
that Marxist critique is deeply informed by this latter scenario. See “Aesthetic Revolution,” 123-128.


5 Ibid., 182.

6 Ibid., 190.

7 Ibid., 191.


9 Ibid., 81.

10 Ibid., 85.

11 Robert Kaufman makes a similar argument about how the aesthetic functions in Marx’s writings on ideology. See “Red Kant, or The Persistence of the Third Critique in Adorno and Jameson,” *Critical Inquiry* 26 (2000), 684.


15 Frye later reworked the essay for the *Anatomy of Criticism*, but in the *Anatomy* Frye is less interested in discussing what satires actually do than in diagramming a spectrum of different kinds of satire, such as, in increasing order of pessimism, “satire of the low norm,” “quixotic satire,” “satire of the high norm,” “ironic tragedy,” “fatalistic tragedy,” and finally *Inferno*-like depictions of “unrelieved bondage.” See *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 226-239.

16 Northrop Frye, “The Nature of Satire,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 14 (1944), 76.

17 Ibid., 79, 88.

18 Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 1. See also Griffin’s excellent summary and analysis of the history of satire criticism from the ancient world to the mid-1990s. I’m particularly indebted to his account of the Yale and Chicago critics.


20 Ibid., 5.

21 Elliott, 15, 58.


23 Ibid., 30.

24 Ibid., 56. Although Thomas Lodge and George Puttenham helped to popularize the satyr-satire theory, Kernan points out that its original source was the fourth-century grammarian Aelius Donatus.

25 Ibid., 62.


27 See Griffin, 31.

29 Griffin, 39.
30 Ibid., 39-40.
31 Ibid., 40-45.
33 Ibid., 54-57.
36 Alchemy is Eggert’s primary example: alchemists were responsible for many important discoveries, but they were also notorious for producing mystical, highly speculative theories that gave more weight to imagination than to trial and error (Katherine Eggert, Disknowledge: Literature, Alchemy, and the End of Humanism in Renaissance England [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015], 5-7).
38 See Lorraine Daston’s discussion of the distinction between natural and artificial in Aristotelian thought, as well as its refraction into the categories of the supernatural, preternatural, natural, artificial, and unnatural in “The Nature of Nature in Early Modern Europe,” Configurations 6 (1998), 154-157.
40 This technique was known as demonstrative regress, which, as Lisa Jardine explains, is “a procedure which combines an inference from an observed effect to its proximate cause with an inference from the proximate cause to the observed effect.” It’s the method Aristotle outlines in the Posterior Analytics for using syllogisms to move back and forth between causes and effects. For most sixteenth-century natural philosophers, demonstrative regress was the single most important tool for the investigation of nature (Lisa Jardine, “Epistemology of the Sciences,” in The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy, ed. Charles B. Schmitt, Quentin Skinner, and Eckhard Kessler [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988], 685–686).
41 Dear, Discipline and Experience, 6.


49 Shapin, 491.


52 Daston and Galison, 374.


54 “rail, v.5,” *OED Online*. 
Chapter 1
John Skelton’s Enlightenment

1 A Rude Rhymer

In 1567 a small jest book was printed with the title *Merie Tales: Newly Imprinted & made by Master Skelton Poet Laureat*. Supposedly written by the poet John Skelton, the book is a collection of amusing anecdotes about Skelton’s adventures in London and the parish of Diss, Norfolk, where he once served as rector. Skelton didn’t actually write the *Merie Tales*; instead, they form part of a popular tradition of comic stories that developed after his death in 1529. Despite his unexpected afterlife as a folk hero, however, by the middle of the sixteenth century Skelton’s literary reputation was already in decline. George Puttenham said that Skelton was “in deede but a rude rayling rimer & all his doings ridiculous,” an incompetent versifier whose writings pleased “onely the popular eare.”\(^1\) Alexander Dyce included *Merie Tales* in his 1843 edition of Skelton’s works, but he dismissed it as a “tissue of extravagant figments which was put together for the amusement of the vulgar.”\(^2\) Like Puttenham’s disdain for Skelton himself, Dyce’s scorn for the jest book centers on its association with low culture. Yet *Merie Tales* plays an important literary role in Dyce’s edition, because it’s a text onto which the view of Skelton as a foolish railer can be projected and dismissed. The image of Skelton in *Merie Tales* as a wandering jester has been used to discredit him as a poet, but it has also been used to separate Skelton’s reputation for vulgarity from his literary accomplishments.

But the contradictions of John Skelton are not limited to his critical reception. They also characterize an important formal aspect of his writing: Skeltonics, the verse form that Skelton created by blending Middle English alliterative verse, popular ballad, medieval Latin lyric, and classical and medieval satire.\(^3\) Skelton applied this mixed form to an enormous range of subjects, from the story of a grotesque ale wife in *The Tunnyng of Elynour Rummynge*, to an elegy for a pet bird in *Phyllyp Sparowe*, to the political and theological attacks of the satires against Cardinal Thomas Wolsey. Dyce’s strategy for rehabilitating Skelton was to emphasize the literary merits of the Wolsey poems, arguing that Skelton was a satiric “genius,” and that *Collyn Clout* and *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?* were his greatest works.\(^4\) And yet, despite Dyce’s attempt to read these poems as the work of a great poet, they only function as satires to the extent that their contradictions and ambiguities are maintained—in short, insofar as they disrupt the idea of a
controlling authorial genius. The possibility of reading Skelton as a writer of popular drivel or, since Dyce, as the first great Tudor poet, is more than just an example of changing attitudes toward sixteenth-century poetry. It’s also an expression of the logic according to which his poems function, because, for Skelton, the scrambling of oppositions like vulgar and poetic is an essential part of how satire works.

In this chapter I argue that Skelton’s attacks on Thomas Wolsey in *Collyn Clout* and *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?* are founded on an exploration of reason, which the poems initially locate in the people’s support for the Catholic church and decentralized state power. But even as Skelton appropriates the voices of the commonwealth against Wolsey’s tyranny, his speakers also express an anxious desire for these same voices to be silenced. Rather than attacking society from an imagined objective position, Skelton’s satires are self-consciously involved in the conflicts and antagonisms that were transforming the Tudor state into a public authority and gradually collapsing the late-medieval social order into a single sphere of private life. On one hand, Skelton’s satires function by turning the collective reason of this nascent private sphere against an irrational and oppressive state. Yet they also demonstrate that such resistance is only possible because the poems reproduce the state’s power to suppress resistance. To put it another way, by depicting Wolsey as an irrational despot, Skelton’s satires end up exposing their own contingency on the contradictions of enlightenment itself.

2 The Connynge of Collyn Clout

George Puttenham was right to call Skelton a railer. The most important concept in *Collyn Clout*, a nearly thirteen-hundred-line denouncement of Wolsey’s administration of the English church, is the notion of “raylynge,” a term that after Skelton became the standard word for describing what satirists do. The OED lists five different senses of “railing” that were current during Skelton’s lifetime. In its most concrete sense, “railing” described the act of regulating or enclosing a space with rails or fences, while metaphorically “to rail” could mean adorning or decorating something. Both of these meanings probably developed from an Anglicized version of the classical Latin noun *regula*, or “rule.” Despite these associations with order and refinement, the verb “rail” is also something of a jumble of false cognates and contradictory meanings. Sometime in the early fifteenth century the Middle French *raier* (“to gush”) entered English, and suddenly writers began using “rail” to describe the spurtling of blood and flowing of
tears. At about the same time, *railler* ("to roll") gave “railing” the added meaning of wandering or roaming to and fro. It wasn’t until another Middle French word, *railler* or *reiller* ("to boast" or “to mock”), entered English in the 1470s that “railing” took on the meaning of a complaint or verbal attack. For a writer of Skelton’s generation, “raylynge” was refinement and containment, but it was also abuse, injury, and wandering.

The first lines of *Collyn Clout* establish the ambiguity of railing as a central principle of the poem. The speaker, who later identifies himself as the rustic titular figure, begins by asking a series of questions that paint a picture of utter futility:

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What can it avayle
To dryve forth a snayle,
Or to make a sayle
Of a herynges tayle?
To ryme or to rayle,
To wryte or to indyte,
Other for delyte
Or elles for despyte?\(^6\)
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The speaker wonders what good it could possibly do to urge on a snail as if it were a plough animal, or to make a sail out of the tail of a tiny fish. The images are absurd, but they also evoke real frustration about uselessly applying human skill to nature. It is line 5 and 6, however, that reveal the truly futile activities: “To rhyme or to rayle / To write or to indyte,” either to please readers or to make them angry. The importance of these lines lies in the way they call attention to Collyn’s understanding of labour. Rather than simply comparing writing to manual work, Skelton’s speaker begins with physical labour ("dryve," “make”) and then seamlessly introduces writing (“ryme,” “wryte”). The word “rayle,” with its ability to signify the act of building fences and the act of writing satire, provides the link between these two very different types of work. As both mental and manual work, railing allows the speaker to wander (another meaning of “rayle”) from fields and ships to ask what use it is “bokes to compyl / Of dyvers maner style” in order to attack sin, or “To teche or to preche / As reason wyll reche” (9-14). As with the other forms of misapplied work, it does little good to attack sin with the techniques of the satirist or the priest, even though “reason” is on their side. The lines exploit the ambiguity of “raylynge” to meander across the boundaries of manual labour, writing, and rational thought—all of which appear to be equally useless.
Undaunted by the apparent futility of the task before him, the speaker proceeds to identify himself and claim authorship of the poem: “And yf ye stande in doute / Who brought this ryme aboute, / My name is Collyn Cloute” (47-9). The name “Collyn” comes from the Latin colonus (“farmer”), and was used generically during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to refer to members of the rural lower class. As many critics have observed, choosing a generic speaker from the peasantry as a mouthpiece for an attack on the church locates Collyn Clout in a “tradition” of ploughman satire dating back to the late fourteenth century. But, as James Simpson argues, ploughman satire had little literary influence until after England’s break with Rome, when Protestant scholars like John Bale became interested in poems that appeared to prefigure the Reformation. Unlike many fourteenth and fifteenth-century ploughmen, Collyn never questions the legitimacy of the church per se and passionately opposes the heresies of Lollards and Lutherans alike. As I’ll show in more detail below, rather than continuing or reviving the plowman tradition, Collyn Clout is a transformation of the radical “plain man” into a peculiar champion of orthodoxy.

Having introduced himself, Collyn goes on to explain how he will “rayl” and why:

I purpose to shake outhe
All my connynge bagge,
Lyke a clerkely hagge.
For though my ryme be ragged,
Tattered and jagged,
Rudely rayne-beaten,
Rusty and mothe-eaten,
Yf ye take well therwith
It hath in it some pyth.

(50-8)

The “pyth” of Collyn’s argument is that there is conflict between “the temporalte” and “the spirytualte” (61-2), that is, between the secular and ecclesiastical spheres of English society. In particular, it’s the ambition and greed of “the prelates” (71) that has caused this conflict. If the abuses of the prelates bring out the literary echoes of an agrarian name like “Collyn,” the nature of Skelton’s innovation is condensed into the speaker’s surname. In the early sixteenth century, “clout” had several different meanings, none of them very positive: it could refer to patched and ragged clothing, a clod of dirt, or a heavy blow with the fist. In the passage above, the word characterizes both Collyn and the verse itself. Skelton’s poem strives to be “ragged,” “rayne-beaten,” “[r]usty,” and “moth-eaten” in its use of colloquial language and images drawn from
lower-class life. At the same time though, Skelton’s speaker promises to empty out his “connynge bagge” like a “clerkely hagge,” suggesting that the poem will also be the kind of sophisticated literary performance that a reader would expect from a learned writer or “clerk.” At the same moment that he introduces himself as a rude common man, Collyn is also preparing to dump out his bag of writerly tricks. As Roland Greene puts it, the name “Collyn Clout” locates the speaker at the social periphery while also creating “the possibility of a rough blow’s turning into a deft strike, and of the margin’s becoming the center or target.” Who exactly is Collyn if he can claim to be both clever clerk and rude farm worker, both center and margin?

One way of approaching this question is through the concept of cunning itself. Collyn’s first use of the term refers to his own cleverness, but it also turns up when Collyn relates the people’s complaints against bishops who use their clerical offices for political and economic gain:

And as for theyr connynge,  
A glommynge and a mommynge,  
And make therof a jape!  
They gaspe and they gape  
All to have promocyon:

(82-86)

The fact that these prelates care only for enriching themselves reduces their training to a mere comic disguise. And later, when Collyn turns his attention to the anti-intellectual complaisance of aristocrats whose indolence made it possible for Wolsey to overpower and persecute them, he warns the cardinal that “Yf they well understode / Howe connynge myght them avaunce, / They wolde pype you another daunce” (616-18). For Skelton, “connynge” designates a kind of cleverness and erudition that’s linked with the use of performance as a means to domination. Moreover, it is a quality that Collyn and Wolsey share, along with their low social origins.

Both the satirist and satiric object of Collyn Clout demonstrate that Skelton understands “connynge” as a kind of useful fraud that is very similar to what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno call “Odyssean cunning.” In Homer’s account of the wanderings of Odysseus, Horkheimer and Adorno see an allegory of their thesis that reason’s quest to destroy myths, free humanity, and subjugate nature simultaneously entrenches the enslavement of mankind. Paradoxically, the key to Odysseus’ success is not strength, but weakness; he gains power over his adversaries by, in a sense, sacrificing himself to them. The episode with Polyphemus in Book 9 of the Odyssey is the clearest example of this strategy. Odysseus, who has introduced himself
to Polyphemus as “Nobody,” escapes from the Cyclops’ cave by stabbing him in the eye. Polyphemus can’t call for help; all he can say is that “Nobody” has blinded him. Odysseus’ self-assertion, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, “as in the entire epic as in all civilization, is self-repudiation.” In order to preserve his selfhood and overpower the mythic monster, Odysseus has to renounce his name. He sacrifices his identity to the name “Nobody” and temporarily becomes a non-self like the Cyclops. In order to subjugate nature (with which the brutish Cyclops is associated) Odysseus has to use reason, that is, he has to sacrifice himself temporarily to the force he wants to control. Horkheimer and Adorno assert that this strategy of control is always present in sacrifice, and that mental cunning “is nothing other than the subjective continuation of the objective untruth of sacrifice, which it supersedes.” Civilization itself is based on this “introversion of sacrifice,” the cunning calculation through which the rational subject preserves himself by renouncing himself.

How, then, does the cunning of reason relate to the “connynge” of Collyn Clout? One of the classic observations about Skelton’s poem is C. S. Lewis’ statement that, despite the fact that the speaker identifies himself by name, the poem also has a strange “anonymity” that gives it a “curious merit.” “The technique, to be sure, is highly personal,” he observes, “but the effect produced is that of listening to the voice of the people itself ... In them Skelton has ceased to be a man and become a mob: we hear thousands of him murmuring and finally thundering at the gates of Hampton Court.” Like Odysseus, Collyn has a name that marks him as an individual, but, like the speakers of ploughman satire, he also seems to speak as a named representative of the nameless masses of poor people. He claims to be telling us what “men say, in dede” (75). And yet Collyn also cancels out his claim to speak for the lower classes by deploying long passages of Latin verse, complaints about the state of theological training in England, and detailed knowledge of Wolsey’s usurpation of the Privy Council. The contradiction is that of cunning itself: Collyn draws attention to his own inconsistencies because they are also those of his target, Wolsey, whom he mimics in the hope of destroying. At the same time, Collyn’s rational cunning is also directed at the people. His voice is a sympathetic imitation of the amorphous vox populi, a voice that Collyn uses to distance himself from the commonalty and, eventually, to appeal to Wolsey for their subjugation. Like the strange tensions between obedience and rebellion that inhere in the word “raylynge,” Collyn’s “connynge” traces a meandering path that leads from
rational resistance to fearful submission, from the collective commonwealth to the singular cardinal, and back again.

The entanglement of reason and domination in *Collyn Clout* can’t be understood, however, without some sense of how Skelton depicts Wolsey as a threat to the integrity of the social order. From Collyn’s perspective, stability depends on maintaining the existing relations of power between the three estates that make up English society: the church, the nobility, and the commonalty. The most visible example is Wolsey’s meddling with the legal system. When “Jacke and Gyll” bring forth a “byll,” or legal request, unqualified bishops clumsily “lumber forth the lawe,” altering it as they like in order to help themselves and “theyr owne causes” (92-101). The bishops (Skelton often generalizes Wolsey’s deeds onto a number of unnamed corrupt bishops) enrich themselves by interfering in secular legal matters and, as a result, neglect “the churches ryght” (105), which should be their “pryncypall cure” or care (102). Collyn’s objections focus on the bishops’ self-enrichment through the law, but he’s also deeply disturbed by the state’s encroachment on feudal law and its “jurysdictyons” (110).

When Wolsey isn’t getting rich by unravelling the legal system, Collyn claims, he’s busy destroying the English church. In particular, Wolsey’s mismanagement of the church has eroded the boundary between the sacred and the worldly. By overtaxing and shutting down monastic houses, Wolsey has forced the monks and nuns to become spiritual merchants:

```
Relyguous men are fayne
For to tourne agayne
In secula seculorum,
And to forsake theyr corum
And vacabundare per forum,
And take a fyne meritorum,
Contra regulam moram

And to synge from place to place,
Lyke apostataas.
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(374-86)

The monks turn away from their cloisters forever (*in secula seculorum*) to wander through the market (*vacabundare per forum*) as apostates offering their services for pay (*meritorum*), which is against the rules of the monastic orders (*Contra regulam moram*). The same is true of the “sely nonnes” (389) who flee the cloister and “Must cast up theyr blacke vayles / And set up theyr
fucke sayles / To catch wynde with their ventayles” (396-8). Both images show the devaluation of religion by trade and exchange, and Skelton parallels this contamination with a jarring mixture of colloquial English and Ecclesiastical Latin. The monks sell prayers in the market like any other commodity. The nuns, meanwhile, have become merchant adventurers. They set sail in search of profit by transforming their habits into “fucke sayles,” a bawdy pun that refers to the foresail of a ship but also suggests that these brides of Christ become prostitutes when they “cast up theyr blacke vayles” and expose themselves to the world.

Similarly, Wolsey and his bishops have undermined the people’s trust in the clergy by appointing illiterate yokels as parish priests. These priests are supposed to act as intermediaries between God’s word and the parishioners, but they understand so little Latin that they “wotteth never what thei rede” (234). Collyn finds their attempts to read the Latin services aloud particularly disgusting:

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Theyr lernynge is so small,
Theyr prymes and houres fall
And lepe out of theyr lyppes
Lyke sawdust or drye chyppes.
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(240-43)

Rather than praying eloquently in the language of the church, the priests sputter out sawdust and wood shavings. Much like the mercantile adventures of the monks and nuns, this image is another comic violation of the divisions between temporal and spiritual work. The priests are so ignorant that the words of the Latin services are transubstantiated into a byproduct of manual labour. It’s a funny image, but, like most of the humorous scenes in Collyn Clout, it points to the serious issue of the decomposition of the social order. As a man “Sodaynly upstarte / From the donge carte” (644-5) into a position of kinglike power, Wolsey’s success implies that the only distinction that matters anymore is the distinction between the ruler and the ruled.

And yet, Collyn himself exhibits the incongruities that he attacks in Wolsey. He’s both rustic labourer and learned poetical surveyor of the state of the commonwealth. Like Odysseus imitating the non-self of myth in order to subjugate it, Skelton sacrifices the coherence of Collyn Clout to the amorphous irrationality of Wolsey in the hopes of somehow containing the threat he poses to the temporal and spiritual estates. Skelton’s satire attempts to use “connynge” to depict and, hopefully, control its target by railing at it. Just as Odyssean cunning is both self-sacrifice
and self-preservation, “raylynge,” as I argued earlier, is similarly paradoxical in that it simultaneously designates wandering and containment. Knowing that can help us understand the strangest thing about this poem—the fact that, after channelling the people’s hatred for Wolsey for hundreds of lines, Collyn suddenly begins to turn against them.

This apparent shift in Collyn’s relation to the common people becomes apparent about a third of the way through the poem. Protesting that he merely speaks the truth that everyone already knows, at line 486 Collyn for the first time worries about the implications of voicing the complaints of the people. “My penne nowe wyll I sharpe,” he proclaims, “Agayne all such rebelles / That laboure to confounde / And brynge the church to the grounde” (489-94). He rejects what “men say” about the bishops as heresy and places the blame squarely on the “lay fee” (496), or laity, who slander Wolsey and the church with “language thus poluted” (486).

Collyn then proceeds to pledge his loyalty to the very man he is attacking:

But under your supporte,
Tyll my dyenge day
I shall both wryte and say,
And ye shall do the same,
How they are to blame
You thus to dyffame.
For it maketh me sad
Howe the people are glad
The churche to deprave.

(505-13)

The satire suddenly reverses, and Collyn offers himself as a speaker for Wolsey against the rebellious murmuring of the people, who, as it turns out, are now the ones collapsing the sacred and the secular by bring the church “to the grounde.” Collyn says that the people “Rayles lyke rebelles” (413) and “talkes lyke tytyvylles” (416) (that is, like the devil himself) about the cardinal’s mismanagement of the monastic houses. Later, Collyn condemns the rebellious folk who “Theyr malyce sprede abrode, / Raylynge haynously” (535-6), and charges that critics of the church are “somewhat suspecte / In Luthers secte” (544-5). The people’s “raylynge” is the primary content of the poem, the truth that everyone knows, but it’s also something dangerous that needs to be silenced. This tension is possible because Skeltonic “raylynge” names a range of superimposed opposites: order and disorder; the need for restraint and the act of “spred[ing] abrode”; rebellious “malyce” and the obedient sophistication of a “sharpe” pen; faithful speech that defends the church and Satanic speech that destroys it; the ability to both “wryte” and
“saye”; and, as the opening lines of the poem imply, mental and physical work. Like Odyssean cunning, “raylynge” is an act that imitates the undifferentiated voice of the multitude, but eventually seeks subjugation to the rationality embodied in the power of “one mannes wytte” (993).

Using “raylynge” to explore the effects of Thomas Wolsey’s career on the English church allows Skelton to demonstrate satire’s ability to explore its own involvement in the dialectic between reason and myth. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the poem’s conclusion, when Collyn yet again worries about the possibility of retribution. “Make ye no murmuracyon, / Though I wryte after this facyon” (1079-80), he says, coming closer to pleading than we might expect from someone who claims to have truth on his side. Strangely, Collyn’s response to his opponent’s rage is to fantasize about his own death. The speaker finds himself among the good preachers who have been condemned for criticizing Wolsey’s public and private misdeeds. “Some,” proclaims an authoritarian voice, “shall be sawde” like the prophet Isaiah, or die like the prophet Jeremiah, “Some hanged, some slayne, / Some beaten to the brayne; / And we wyll rule and rayne” (1205-12). Violence and the ability to “rule and rayne” like a monarch are here synonymous. Collyn then takes his death fantasy even further by imagining the destruction of the poem itself. Wolsey will neither heed the speaker’s advice, “Nor wyll suffre this boke / By hoke ne by croke / Prynted for to be” (1237-9). Finally, overwhelmed by the brutality of Wolsey’s response to his “boke,” Collyn finally concedes: “Nowe to withdrawe my pen, / And now a whyle to rest, / Me semeth it for the best” (1248-50). Having enacted his own corporeal and poetic death at the hands of the state, in the poem’s final lines Collyn meekly steers his “shyp” to the “port salue” of Christ and prays that Jesus will send grace to “rectyfye and amende / Thynge that are amys, / Whan that his pleasure is” (1263-5).

In the last hundred lines, then, the poem attempts to erase itself: first the speaker faces capital punishment for libelling Wolsey; next he imagines the poem’s suppression; and lastly Collyn abjures his pen and leaves it to Christ to correct the wrongs done to “eche degre” (60). By the final line, the speaker, his motive for writing, the poem itself, and the state’s response to the poem have virtually disappeared. Collyn’s attempt to “withdrawe” is the culminating instance of his cunning because it’s an act of self-sacrifice that imitates the violence of the state in order to escape it. Collyn’s liberation depends finally on Christ, who will “rectyfye and amende” both
Wolsey and the people. In order for that to happen, however, Collyn must “withdrawe” himself and accept the fact that God will only act when “his pleasure is.”

The paradoxes of “raylynge” and “connynge” allow Collyn to explore how Wolsey’s rise has transformed reason itself, but railing alone isn’t enough to fix things. But, as the first lines suggest (“what can it avayle?”), the point of Collyn Clout isn’t to coerce Wolsey into being reasonable. Instead, through all the strange contradictions of railing and cunning, the poem is reproducing the destabilizing effect of historical and political change on reason’s meaning and truth-value. Skelton is using satire, that is, as a means of seeing rationality as a product of history.

3 Wolsey and the Commonwealth

Because of its similar use of Skeltonics and its obsessive focus on Wolsey, Why Come Ye Nat to Courte? is usually seen as a sequel to Collyn Clout. Nevertheless, Why Come Ye Nat to Courte? is a very different text from its predecessor. In the first lines, Skelton deploys a speaker who sounds very much like Collyn but is clearly not the lower-class persona of ploughman satire: “All noble men of this take hede, / And beleve it as your crede” (1-2), he announces. Instead of posing a question like “What can it avayle / To dryve forth a snayle?”, this speaker begins by asserting that he already has the answers. Unlike Collyn, this speaker doesn’t situate himself among the common people. He also presumes to have the authority to tell the elite what they should believe. He warns that powerful men who are “To hasty of sentence,” too quick to anger, too proud, and have “To lyght intellegence” (3-10) are dangerous because

Where these kepe resyndence,
Reson is banysshed thence,
And also dame Prudence,
With sober Sapyence.

(10-14)

The result is that “Unto a great confusyon / A noble man may fall” (21-2). The dissociation of reason and nobility leads to the “confusyon” or collapse of status, a danger the speaker emphasizes by repeating his opening call for all noble men to “take hede” (27-8). Suddenly, however, he’s interrupted by one or more additional speakers: “Hec vates ille / De quo loquntur mille. / Why come ye nat to court?” (29-31). “These things the bard [speaks] / Of whom a
thousand speak,” someone interjects in Latin. The poem’s introduction, then, returns to many of Collyn Clout’s basic problems while altering them significantly. In Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?, the marginalized anonymous speaker is famous and very close to the centre of power, reason is depicted as an aristocratic quality experiencing downward-mobility, and the people are a broad category encompassing the literate and the illiterate.

The answer to the question “Why come ye nat to court?” is a very long gloss on what is essentially a one-word answer: Wolsey. The speaker accuses the “Chefe counselour” (79) of transforming the court into a place of debauchery and excess and of shaming England with his “carlesse” (79) bungling of the Calais conference of 1521. Wolsey had travelled to Calais with the objective of ending the conflict between France and Spain, but returned three months later without securing a treaty. Despite the perception in England that he had failed the king, Wolsey used the conference to begin secret negotiations with Charles V’s representatives and lay the groundwork for a joint invasion of France. Calais was, in spite of appearances, one of Wolsey’s greatest diplomatic performances. Whether the speaker is unaware of these facts or simply unwilling to admit them, he sees the result of Calais as clear evidence of Wolsey’s incompetence and denounces him as a threat to common sense itself:

There vayleth no resonynge;
For Wyll dothe rule all thynge,
Wyll, Wyll, Wyll, Wyll, Wyll!
He ruleth alway styll.
Good Reason and good Skyll,
They may garlycke pyll,
Cary sackes to the myll,
Or pescoddes they may shyll,
Or elles go rost a stone!

(104-12)

The cardinal’s irrationality is depicted vividly in line 106 where the ranting repetition of the word “Wyll” comes close to inarticulate noise. As in the poem’s opening lines, reason is once again exiled. This time, however, Skelton specifies that reason and “Skyll” may as well go pick garlic, or carry sacks of grain to the mill, or pod peas, or roast a stone. Reason, these lines assert, has been marginalized, ejected from the centre of power by “Wyll,” and is now present only in the manual work of everyday people.
Wolsey’s “Wyll,” however, isn’t simply bad governance. After a long account of the cardinal’s diplomatic failures and his persecution of the aristocracy, the interlocutor repeats his original question: “Ones yet agayne / Of you I wolde frayne / Why come ye nat to court?” (399-401). “To whyche court?” the speaker replies, “To the kynges courte? / Or to Hampton Court?” (402-4).

Wolsey’s power has grown so great that Hampton Court, the cardinal’s Thames-front palace southwest of London, has made it difficult to know what “the courte” actually means. Skelton’s speaker laments that

The kynges courte
Shulde have the excellence;
But Hampton Court
Hath the preemynence!

(406-409)

When Skelton’s speaker responds to his interlocutor by asking “whyche court?” he’s really asking a much more troubling question: which king? It’s no longer clear, because Wolsey’s authority “dyggeth so in the trenche / Of the court royall / That he ruleth them all” (434-6). A trench or gap has opened in the “court royall” and compromised the speaker’s ability to locate and name it with certainty. As he exposes the changing relations of power immanent in the word “courte,” Skelton’s speaker suggests that the concentration of power in the hands of Henry and his first minister has produced not just political but also epistemological changes. Meanings have shifted, and words are struggling to keep up.

Like “raylynge,” which in Collyn Clout names both rebellion and submission to authority, the irrational “Wyll” of Wolsey in Why Come Ye Nat to Courte? attempts to rule the nation while undermining the coherence of the class distinctions that structure it. This contradiction is especially apparent in the cardinal’s relationship with the aristocracy, in which “raylynge” and “Wyll” appear to be synonymous. Wolsey “rebukes them and rayles,” calling them “horsons,” “vassayles,” “knave,” “churles sonnys,” “raynebetyn beggers,” and “recrayed ruffyns all ragged” (601-6). Ostensibly performing the will of the king, Wolsey extends his own personal power over England by subjugating the traditional ruling class. But Wolsey doesn’t simply place himself above the existing social order; he reduces the entire hierarchy of commons and nobles to a much simpler relationship: ruler and ruled. The three estates of Collyn Clout have been reduced to a centralized government under Wolsey’s control and a “raynebetyn” multitude that includes everyone from beggars to lords.
What Skelton is describing is the erosion of what Jürgen Habermas terms “publicity of representation” and the development of England’s earliest form of “public authority,” a single sphere of power that exists in opposition to a realm of private persons.\(^\text{22}\) As the authority to rule became concentrated in what Skelton calls the “court royall,” the nobility began to lose the “publicness” they derived from their lordly status. Instead, says Habermas, “the aristocratic ‘society’ that emerged from that Renaissance society no longer had to represent its own lordliness (i.e., its manorial authority), or at least no longer primarily; it served as a vehicle for the representation of the monarch.”\(^\text{23}\) The emphasis placed on court in *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?*, whether Hampton Court or the king’s court, and the reduction of all classes to undifferentiated poverty suggest that Skelton is using Wolsey’s relations with the chivalry as a way to explore poetically the emergent notions of public and private in English society. For Skelton, the truly unprecedented thing about Wolsey’s career is his transformation of the publicity of the aristocracy into a function of the superior public authority of the Tudor state.

The poem’s concern with the erosion of aristocratic power and the transformation of the state into a public authority reaches its climax when the speaker shifts his attention from attacking the cardinal to elegizing the commonwealth. Here the political justification for Skelton’s association of reason with the people and their labour becomes clearer: the people have “reason” and “skyll” because rationality is decentralized. Henry has created a dangerous situation in making Wolsey his sole source of counsel. The speaker argues that

\[
\text{... the wyttys of many wyse} \\
\text{Moche better can devyse,} \\
\text{By theyr cyrcumspection,} \\
\text{And theyr sad dyrection,} \\
\text{To cause the commune weale} \\
\text{Longe to endure in heale.}
\]

(766-71)

The speaker says that a council of many wise men will preserve the best interests of the commonwealth by virtue of their collective “cyrcumspection.” As he says a few lines earlier, “It is a nyce reconynge” to give all “the governymge” and all “the rule of this lande, / Into one mannys hande” (760-3). The “nyce”-ness, or foolishness, of allowing Wolsey to control the state is apparent in the contrast between “governymge,” the ability of the state to rule and control its subjects, and “dyrection,” a word that suggests regulation and guidance rather than the exercise of coercive authority.\(^\text{24}\) Legitimate “dyrection” doesn’t require the separation of the state from
the private sphere of the people, but rather allows the “commune weale” to “endure in heale,” to endure as a coherent organic whole. The councilors would speak for collective will of thousands, while Wolsey speaks only for himself. But how much of a difference is there really between England being ruled by the council of one man or ten men? Just as Wolsey’s “governynge” collapses English society into a private sphere subject to the power of a public authority, so too the “dyrection” of wise councilors depends on the idea of a “commune weale” that reduces a heterogeneous population to a governable whole.

The important thing to recognize about Skelton’s use of the term “commune weale” is that it isn’t an expression of nostalgia for the days when feudalism ensured the good of all. Indeed, the OED records only one instance of the terms “common weale” and “common wealth” before Skelton’s lifetime. As applied to England, both the word and the concept were products of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. One of the earliest articulations of how the commonwealth was conceived during the Tudor period is *The Tree of Commonwealth*, a short treatise written in 1508 by Edmund Dudley. Dudley likens the commonwealth to a huge tree sheltering all animals “both fatt and leane” from heat and cold. “In lek maner,” he says, “all the subiectes of that realme wher this tree of common welth doth sewerly growe are ther by holpen and relyved from the highest degre to the lowerst.” For Dudley, the wellbeing of the realm is ensured by maintaining harmony between the clergy, the aristocracy or “Chivalrie,” and the more vague category of the “commynaltie,” which includes “all the marchauntes, craftesmen, artificers, francklents, graciers, tyllours and other generally the people of this realme.” Unlike his account of the nature and responsibilities of clerics and lords, Dudley’s description shows that the commonalty is actually a highly diverse grouping of classes, from poor husbandmen to rich merchants. Because they commonalty is so diverse, Dudley can’t describe its duties as precisely as the responsibilities of the clergy and the nobility. He can only say that they must “not grudge nor mumure to lyve in labor and pain” nor “presume aboue ther owne degr”.

Two decades later in a tract titled *The Book named The Governor* (1531) Thomas Elyot, a lawyer and ally of Wolsey, seized on the dangerous implications of asserting the existence of a common good. Elyot asserts that the word “commonwealth” is not, as many believe, an accurate
translation of the Latin respublica: “Public (as Varro saith) is derived of people, which in Latin is called Populus; wherefore it seemeth that men have been long abused in calling Rempublicam a common weal. And they which do suppose it so to be called for that, that everything should be to all men in common, without discrepancy of any estate or condition, be thereto moved more by sensuality than by any good reason or inclination to humanity.”

Elyot distinguishes between the “common weal,” which he calls derisively “res plebeia,” and the “public weal,” which he offers as a more accurate translation of respublica. The former implies that the nation’s interests are those of the commonalty and therefore radically undermines class distinction. The latter, he argues, preserves the “discrepancy” between classes while gesturing at their mutual interest in the prosperity of the realm. Rather than describing the public weal in Dudley’s terms of mutual protection, Elyot claims that it is “a body living, compact or made of sundry estates and degrees of men, which is disposed by the order of equity and governed by the rule and moderation of reason.”

The public weal is a body politic with clearly defined roles and degrees of status organized on the principle of “equity,” or fairness, which tempers the radical claims for equality implied in the word “common weal.” Most importantly, the public weal is “governed” and moderated by reason, while Dudley’s tree of commonwealth is merely a place where beasts flee in order to be “protectyd and confortyd” from the assaults of nature. Elyot’s public weal, that is, articulates the emergence of the English state as a rational public authority.

That said, Elyot’s use of the term “public” is not simply synonymous with the state. He emphasizes its etymological derivation from populus (“the people”), a word that in Latin primarily designated the Roman state but also bore the meaning of “common” in the sense of “belonging to the people,” and, in some rare cases, carried the negative sense that Elyot associates with the adjective plebeius.

Although Elyot strives to demonstrate that the word “public” is entirely different from the word “common,” he does not fully escape the dilemma that Dudley was left with in asserting the existence of a “weal” that blurs social distinctions into mutual interest. I want to suggest that this tension between what Elyot calls “discrepance” and a broader public or common profit remains irreconcilable because it was an unresolved tension in the development of the absolutist state into a public body existing in opposition to a private sphere. Despite Wolsey’s reforms in justice and taxation, centralized public government in England was only just beginning to replace decentralized administration. The commonwealth shouldn’t be seen as a medieval view of life entering its decline with the advent of Tudor
absolutism, but rather as a concept that allowed early sixteenth-century writers to respond to the implications of collapsing the late-medieval social hierarchy into a single sphere of private existence. As David Rollison argues, the idea of the commonwealth always implied an element of subversion because it was a notion that developed out of a long history of social rebellion in England beginning with the peasants’ revolt of 1381 and continuing well into the sixteenth century. Whether it’s presented as a defense of inequality or as a struggle for the interests of the commonalty, the common or public weal ultimately tends toward the subsuming of all classes under the category of a private sphere subject to the authority of a rational state.

For Skelton’s speaker, the unresolved tension between the common good of the nation and the preservation of what Elyot calls “discrepance” among classes gives the concept of the commonwealth the strange character of a thing that’s both new and old at the same time. This is especially evident when the speaker turns his attention to the economic woes of the citizens of London, on whom Wolsey had imposed forced loans to fund Henry’s wars in France. According to the speaker, affluent Londoners have had to trade in their valuable plate. The contents of their cupboards are “tourned to glasse, / From sylver to brasse, / From golde to pewter” (902-4). A kind of reverse alchemy has occurred in which pure gold and silver plate has not simply been exchanged but “tourned” or transmuted into dull alloys like brass and pewter. The implication is that with a loss of these markers of status there is an accompanying loss of actual status, even for those who derive their position from both wealth and bloodline:

   My lord now and syr knyght,  
   Good evyn and good nyght!  
   For now, Syr Trestram,  
   Ye must wear bukram,  
   Or canves of Cain,  
   For silkes are wane.

(915-20)

Syr Trestram is a generalized figure for the old families of the traditional aristocracy. Although his exclusive right to wear silk was (at least in theory) protected by law, the knight Syr Trestram is now compelled to wear either buckram, a stiff, rough fabric, or canvas of Cane, a coarse cloth imported from France—the eventual destination for the money extorted from his estate. With nothing to distinguish him as a noble, Syr Trestram has become part of an undifferentiated realm of poverty subject to Wolsey’s administration.
Compressing his argument into a play on words, the speaker observes that

Our royals that shone,
Our nobles are gone
Amonge the Burgonyons
And Spanyard onyons,
And the Flanderkyns.

At the literal level, the speaker is saying that the city has been drained of its coins to meet the cost of waging war with France and negotiating Spanish “onyons,” a pun on the etymological root of “onion” in the Latin word *unio*, “unity.”\(^{33}\) Although the actual effect of the loans was not economically crippling, the crown created a temporary currency shortage that, along with the need to sell off plate, superficially exaggerated the impact of the seizures.\(^{34}\) The speaker is describing a problem that is both social and economic, however, and the obvious double significance of “nobles” and “royals” as denominations of currency and levels of class illustrates the impossibility of separating one sense from the other. Wolsey has converted London’s upper classes into ragged beggars by not only extracting the city’s “nobles” and “royals,” that is, its coins, but also the very terms that designate the ranks of its aristocratic citizens. As with the loss of plates and silk, the loss of coin results in a simultaneous loss of actual status, not just its outward markings. This raises a troubling question: if a man like Syr Trestram can have his noble rank obliterated simply through the removal of his assets and possessions, does his social status have any objective existence apart from his wealth? In other words, is his nobility simply a function of his “nobles”?

The poem’s many depictions of the chivalry and commonalty collapsing into a single social sphere are among its strongest condemnations of Wolsey’s policies, so it’s difficult to argue that Skelton’s speaker is actively attempting to demystify the ontological difference between a knight and a beggar. And yet, at the very moment that the speaker expresses outrage at making London’s lords into paupers, his use of language re-enacts the destruction of the chivalry by suggesting that nobility, like poverty, is a contingent rather than essential category. Skelton’s speaker wishes for “the commune weale / Longe to endure in heale” (766-71), but like Dudley and Elyot he struggles with the problem of what “commune” means: a shared good that preserves the existing social hierarchy while undermining the possibility of maintaining a hierarchy at all.
But Wolsey also has another problem: he lacks the legitimizing power of reason. In the process of centralizing the authority of the state, the cardinal’s irrational “wyll” has pushed rationality to the margins of society. As the poem’s opening lines illustrate, reason is no longer the exclusive property of the elite, but can now only be found in the “Good Reason and good Skyll” (108) of the manual labour of the commonalty. Reason is being privatized, and it’s this private realm of rational subjects that makes Skelton’s satire possible. This becomes clear at the end of the poem when the speaker, having finally exhausted his store of scandalous rumours about Wolsey, closes with a brief address to his readers, some of whom might be wondering how he can possibly justify writing such a poem. In response he asserts,

I wyll answere lyke a clerke:
For trewly and unfayned,
I am forcebly constrayned
At Juvynals request
To wryght of this glorious gest,
Of this vayne gloryous best,
His fame to be encrest
At every solempne feest,
Quia difficile est
Satiram non scribere.

(1208-17)

While *Collyn Clout* concludes with a submission to fate and to God’s will, the speaker of this poem appears to remain defiantly individualistic and intensely anti-Wolsey to the very end. Instead of answering like a good Christian, the speaker responds like a clerkly poet by citing Juvenal as a precedent for his approach. Juvenal’s satires, however, do more than justify; they leave the speaker “forcebly constrayned” to expose the tyrannical and dangerous activities of the king’s most senior advisor. The need is so great that it has become “difficult not to write satire,” he claims, concluding the poem with a near-direct quote from Juvenal’s first satire. Rather than locating his authority to speak in an aristocratic patron or in the power of Christ, Skelton’s speaker suggests that the precedent of a pagan writer ought to be enough to satisfy his critics. “Blame Juvinall, and blame nat me” (8), he reiterates in the poem’s postscript. Deflecting blame onto Juvenal is by no means a literary innovation, of course, although it did become a standard convention of English verse satire after Skelton. The importance of these lines lies in the fact that Skelton uses Juvenal quite differently than later satirist did. For the speaker, Juvenal’s “request” is an irresistible force demanding that irrationality be exposed to “fame” and made the topic of discussion at “every solempne feest” in England. Through satire Wolsey is reduced to a mere
“best,” that is, he is subjected to a rational discourse that demystifies his power as naked brutality. This is only possible because the speaker’s poem will be read and heard by people who possess “good reason,” which gives them the ability to evaluate and reject Wolsey’s oppressive “wyll.” That said, Skelton’s poem can hardly be characterized as democratic, and his view of the commonwealth is a far cry from the rational-critical public sphere of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet, the notion of the commonwealth as a problematic yet necessary condition of possibility for satirizing a new form of state power does suggest a sophisticated understanding of how reason was emerging as a mediating force between the people and an increasingly autonomous public authority.

Perhaps the poem’s final lines, then, can be read as an answer to its initial question, “Why come ye nat to court?” The state is a tyranny of authoritarian “wyll,” and reason seems now to exist only in private. For Skelton’s speaker, appealing to reason means writing for an audience of private people outside the centre of power. Satire is a means by which the nascent private sphere can turn its collective reason back onto the state in order to critique it. But this is not simply a choice of audience; the speaker is also “forcebly constrayned” by the very conditions that make it possible for him to write such a satire. In other words, in order to free himself from the tyranny of centralized court power, the speaker must first subject himself to a commonwealth that, although moderated by reason, is also barbaric in its subversion of class distinction.

 Appropriately, the poem’s Latin postscript ends by repeating its initial self-description: “Hec vates ille / De quo loguntur mille.” The speaker is the poet of whom a thousand speak, and a thousand speak through him. In John Skelton’s poetry, the paradoxes and contradictions of railing offer a means of seeing reason in historical terms, as an intellectual tool that emerges from the specific social and political conditions of the early sixteenth century.

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3 For a brief overview of critical attempts to explain the formal origins of Skeltonics, as well as an argument that resists traditional assumptions about Skelton’s formal uniqueness, see Jane Griffiths, “‘An Ende of an Olde Song’: Middle English Lyric and the Skeltonic,” *Review of English Studies* 247 (2009): 705-22.
4 Dyce, xlvii.
7 Scattergood, 466, note to line 49.
12 Famously, Wolsey was the son of Ipswich butcher. See Peter Gwyn, The King’s Cardinal: The Rise and Fall of Thomas Wolsey (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1990), 1.
14 Ibid., 53.
15 Ibid., 41.
16 Ibid., 43.
18 Ibid., 140.
19 Notwithstanding Collyn’s horror, few modern historians see Wolsey’s judicial policies as tyranny. For instance, he attempted to correct the abuses and inefficiencies of the common law courts and allowed common law cases to be appealed before him in the star chamber. In 1517-20 Wolsey also set up a special under-court, “the king’s most honourable Council in his Court of Requests,” where the poor could have their cases heard by two royal councillors instead of their local justices of the peace. See John Guy, Tudor England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 91; and Gwyn, The King’s Cardinal, 123.
20 Heiserman, Skelton and Satire, 207.
21 Gwyn, The King’s Cardinal, 156.
23 Habermas, Structural Transformation, 10-1.
26 Ibid., 40.
27 Ibid., 46.
29 Ibid., 1.
30 Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “pūblicus, a, um, adj.”
32 Greg Walker suggests that Skelton’s depiction of the impoverishment of the city’s residents is one of the poem’s most important moments because *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?* is, in part, a response to the loans forced on affluent Londoners in 1522 in order to fund the invasion of France planned at the Calais conference. Despite the poem’s emphasis on their hardships, however, the wealthiest citizens of London were actually largely supportive of the enterprise against France because it would ensure stable access to the Dutch cloth market. See Greg Walker, *John Skelton and the Politics of the 1520s*, Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 103-14.
34 Walker, *John Skelton*, 112.
Chapter 2
The Ethical-Historical Subject of Donne’s Satyres

1 Rough Lines

John Donne’s third satire is the only Elizabethan satire that most students of English literature will ever encounter. The more Elizabethan satire you read, however, the less that seems like a bad thing. As C. S. Lewis puts it,

> it must be confessed, that the formal satires of the nineties are, in the aggregate, a weariness. They have their happy moments; but there is far too little irony and invention, and far too much direct denunciation. The shapeless Roman model was a fatal encouragement to the Elizabethan love of facile moral ferocity. Nothing is easier, or less interesting, than to proclaim with raucous conviction that whores are unchaste, misers ungenerous, and hypocrites insincere.¹

Verse satire is often boring because it tends to come across as moral posturing. Modern critics have had trouble seeing the appeal of these poems, but readers and writers in the 1590s clearly thought that satire was interesting. Satire provided a way to think through, or at least articulate, the problems they were worried about. Bad satires take moral truths for granted and see individual behavior in complete isolation from history. Good satires though, like those by John Donne, use the connection between the moral and the historical to interrogate truth itself.

In this chapter, I argue that Donne’s Satyres are interesting because they see individual vices and virtues as matters of ethics as well as matters of history. They derive this perspective from two sources: from what Erich Auerbach calls the Christian-figural view of history, and the pre-Christian realism of the Roman poet Horace. Donne’s satires show historical forces like economics, class, state power, and divine grace emanating from the lives of individuals and linking them with histories that otherwise appear to be beyond them. They do not, as many classical and early modern satires do, treat history as a static background against which ethical agents move. In the first and second satires, for example, Donne mocks men who are not just immoral or ridiculous, but whose identities are shaped by and, in turn, shape their world. “Satyre 3,” however, is Donne’s fullest exploration of the implications of ethical-historical satire. In this poem, “railing” becomes a way to articulate a serious epistemological problem that arises from the Christian-figural viewpoint: how can you sort out divine truth when every object, act, and thought is permeated by history? How can you choose the true religion, the one that isn’t just a
historical accident, if historical forces emanate from everything and everyone? Donne’s satirist
doesn’t have an answer, but he does have satire. The act of “railing,” that is, turns out to be the
aesthetic of knowing the impossibility of knowing.

All of Donne’s *Satyres* are about knowledge in some way, but “Satyre 3” deals most directly
with the problem of figuring out the truth. Rather than attacking the petty sins of courtiers and
merchants, “Satyre 3” investigates the failures of individual early modern Christians to “seek
ture religion.” Yet much of the poem’s esteem comes from the fact that it seems less dated than
other Elizabethan satires. J. B. Leishman observes that “it is only in the third, on the search for
ture religion, that [Donne] is consistently inspired by his subject in itself,” while in the other four
“there is much that is not clearly distinguishable from the general run of Elizabethan satire,
including an absence of clear outline and plan, a tendency to pile detail upon detail and to present
us with just one damned thing after another.” Leishman anticipates the attitude of many future critics when he observes that “the rough lines of this satire are penetrated by an intense eagerness for truth.” It’s worth reading, that is, because there’s more to it than the transitory details that fill most Renaissance satires. Its value comes
from a desire for a truth beyond the poem.

Leishman is right about what makes “Satyre 3” a great poem, but perhaps not quite in the way he
thinks. For the most part, Leishman sees “Satyre 3” as a container for outside ideas rather than a
poetic process that develops them. Yet the wording of his analysis resists the dualism it sets up
between form and content, art and world. The desire for truth, he says, “penetrates” the “rough
lines” of the poem. There is something about the roughness of satire, its use of everyday
language and irregular meter, that suggests to Leishman barriers ready to be broken, lines asking
to be crossed. The poem’s lines, then, are also rough in the sense of provisional, unclear, or
indistinct. They preempt the penetration of the poem by the world of history and ideas that
appears to be outside of it. This roughness also extends to the vices the poems attack, which are
just as often those of the speaker as those of other people. The choices you make in your life,
says Donne’s satirist in “Satyre 3,” are only roughly separate from the larger world. The rough
lines of this satire refute any simple opposition between poem and world, individual and social,
ethical and historical. Even in Leishman’s attempt to contain “Satyre 3,” its roughness and
penetrability still manage to find expression.
The first lines of “Satyre 3” reexamine not only the approach Donne has taken so far as a satirist, but also the goals of satire itself:

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Kind pity chokes my spleen; brave scorn forbids
These tears to issue which swell my eyelids:
I must not laugh nor weep sins, and be wise.
Can railing, then, cure these worn maladies?
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Donne’s speaker claims to be in a state of artistic paralysis. He even questions the value of “railing” itself, recalling the first lines of Skelton’s *Collyn Clout*, which ask what it can “avayle” to “To ryme or to rayle.” The question is provoked by the speaker’s sense of being pulled between two sets of emotional opposites. He firstly feels a tension between a feeling of “kind pity” and his splenetic hatred of vices, and secondly between his “brave scorn” for sins and the tears he wants to shed for sinners. He is immobilized, in other words, between his duties as a Christian and his duties as a satirist. The notion of “kind pity,” however, is less Christian than it appears. The word “kind” means goodness or generosity. It also carries the sense of a shared likeness of blood or identity. This means that kindness has a built-in sense of restriction: you are kind to your kind. The same curious self-division appears in the word “pity.” Most basically, pity means something like compassion. But before the seventeenth century, “pity” was also a synonym for “piety,” which describes an individual’s obedience to religious and social norms. Pity and piety, then, locate the speaker in two ways: in relation to sinful individuals and in relation to religious institutions. Like kindness, pity expands the field of human compassion as much as it constricts it within the bounds of obedience to authority.

Kind pity, that is, “chokes” itself just as much as it chokes the speaker’s splenetic scorn for vice. And because melancholy weeping and haughty laughter are both characteristic of a splenetic humour, spleen chokes itself too. How are we supposed to interpret these divisions within divisions? M. Thomas Hester argues that the goal of the *Satyres* as a whole is to strike a balance between “kind pity” and “brave scorn.” The compromise is found in the Old Testament “zealous muse” that combines love with righteous anger. This reading, however, elides Donne’s depiction of a speaker caught between alternatives that are themselves already divided. The speaker isn’t looking for an answer that erases or balances out self-contradiction, but rather one that can articulate the problem he is trying to describe. He says that he must neither “laugh nor weep sins, and be wise,” and then asks whether “railing” can “cure these worn maladies” (3-4).
Joshua Scodel perceptively observes that “[i]t is not clear what the implied answer is to Donne’s question concerning ‘railing’ or whether the rest of the verse paragraph is to be interpreted as virtuous ‘railing’ or not. It is clear, however, that Donne desires not to suppress but rather to regulate his emotions properly as he confronts mankind’s sins.”

Although railing follows from the speaker’s vow to be wise, it’s left undefined and the question of its effectiveness is left open. How will the speaker be wise? Will he rail in this poem or will he, as Scodel puts it, “regulate”? The ambiguity of railing is, in fact, what allows it to offer a way forward. Railing neither releases the strangle hold in which pity and spleen are locked, nor does it make sense of the way they choke themselves. Railing is a literary means of knowing the world that works precisely because it chokes itself. As their shared etymological link to the Latin verb *regulare* implies, railing and regulating tend to happen at the same time.

What does the speaker hope to learn through railing? Another question reveals the central concern of the satire: “Is not our mistress, fair Religion, / As worthy of all our souls’ devotion, / As virtue was in the first blinded age?” (5-7). Why are Christians, he asks, not as committed to finding “true religion” (43) as the Greeks and Romans were to the pursuit of moral perfection? The consequence the speaker imagines is that the “strict life” of the ancients might allow them to be saved through “imputed faith,” while lazy Christians end up damned (13-15). “Oh if thou dar’st, fear this,” he warns, “This fear great courage and high valour is!” (15-16). Despite living in the age of grace, people continue to act as though “Earth’s honour” were the priority and not “Heav’n’s joys” (8-9). To illustrate, the speaker lists the various ways that stupid men try to prove their high valour and great courage: joining the Dutch to fight the Spanish; sailing rough seas; exploring deep mines and frozen wastelands; braving the burning of the tropical sun; braving the burning of the Inquisition; and, finally, threatening any man who “cries not ‘Goddess!’ to thy mistress” (17-27). The speaker argues that adventurers are just as ridiculous as swaggering courtiers, and he dismisses the search for worldly honour as “Courage of straw”:

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Oh desperate coward! Wilt thou seem bold, and
To thy foes and his (who made thee to stand
Sent’nel in his world’s garrison) thus yield,
And for forbidden wars leave th’appointed field?
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(29-32)

Suddenly, the argument chokes itself. After ten lines of sarcastically describing deeds that merely “seem bold,” the speaker describes true spiritual bravery in the same military terms that
he has just rejected. The argument only fails, however, if we fail to recognize it as railing. As raling, these lines demonstrate that courage and valour continue to be defined through largely secular late-medieval aristocratic values, so much so that it is difficult to conceive of spiritual valour without falling back into the language of martial bravery. Railing against courage of straw does not lead the satirist to offer an alternative understanding of courage. Instead, it uses the contradiction of imagining a thing to be praised in terms of a thing to be blamed to argue the need for a new vocabulary for spiritual, non-aristocratic courage, a vocabulary Donne’s poem doesn’t claim to have. Solving the problem is not the point. Through railing, the poem is trying to make the problem visible.

But true courage is only a subordinate issue to the larger problem of searching for the true faith. Donne’s poem makes finding true religion seem like an obvious imperative that most people irresponsibly ignore. However, as Richard Strier points out, the idea that there is an injunction to “Seek true religion” (42) was still a radical notion in the 1590s. “For most Europeans in this period,” Strier says, “religion was not something to be sought; it was something given, something into which one was born or which was dictated to one from above. It was not the object of an intellectual quest.”

Donne’s satirist returns again and again to the need for a search because he knows that faith is rarely a rational choice. For example, Myrius is a Catholic because he thinks his Mistress, Fair Religion, was in Rome a thousand years ago. Now, “He loves the rags so as we here obey / The state-cloth where the Prince sat yesterday” (47-48). Rome’s ragged religion is just a hollowed-out sign of authority, but that’s enough for him. Crantz the Calvinist likes his religion “plain, simple, sullen, young, / Contemptuous,” like a lecher who has a thing for “No wenches … but coarse, country drudges” (49-54). Graius embraces the Church of England because preachers and laws tell him to, like a man who marries according to his “godfather’s will” just to avoid a penalty (55-62). “Careless Phrygius” thinks all religions, like all women, are corrupt “whores,” while Gracchus thinks their differences are merely a matter of “divers habits,” differences of fashion (62-68). The language of misogynist satire makes it seem like Donne is attacking individual moral failures. Yet, as Strier emphasizes, few early modern Christians would have agreed that they were responsible for an active faith of the kind Donne is describing. The speaker’s railing is aimed neither at the failures of institutions, nor those of people. The point is that faith is a network of interactions between the contingent forces of
coercive power and the arbitrary whims of individual “humours” (53). Considerations of truth have nothing to do with it.

What to do then? Since “Truth and Falsehood be / Near twins, yet Truth a little elder is” (72-73), the satirist’s suggestion is to “ask thy father” which is the true faith, and “Let him ask his” (71-72). Some critics see the appeal to paternal authority as part of the speaker’s tentative answer. In fact, it introduces more problems than it solves. Donne’s own father, for instance, lived through the Act of Supremacy, the reign of Edward VI, the Marian persecutions, and the return of state Protestantism under Elizabeth. Christianity in England changed more during the sixteenth century than it had in nearly a thousand years. The speaker’s reference to fathers and grandfathers is hardly a step toward figuring out which faith is “the right” (71). Nevertheless, it’s a key moment in the poem because it hints at why the speaker feels compelled to pursue an active faith. The satirist, as we’ve seen, is attacking the failure of Christians to take responsibility for their religion. Importantly though, he doesn’t treat the failure of the individual to do his moral and spiritual duty in isolation. There are many reasons why people passively or actively refuse to interrogate their faith: national character, coercion, emotional disposition, as well as the influence of family. When the speaker suggests that one way to find the truth is to ask your father, he’s not expecting a clear answer; he’s highlighting the way he sees the problem. Donne’s satirist attacks people for the bad decisions they make, but he also demonstrates the involvement of those decisions with forces outside the individual. In short, he sees his satiric targets historically, rather than just ethically. This blend of history and ethics is what makes Donne’s satires so distinctive. It’s what makes them, in Annabel Patterson’s words, “simply better, more interesting” than those of his contemporaries.

2 I Told You What I Was

In the second chapter of Mimesis, Erich Auerbach answers a question that many readers of satire have asked themselves: why are these poems so boring? Auerbach analyzes a fragment from Petronius’ Satyricon in which a group of money-obsessed Romans attend a dinner party at the home of Trimalchio, a wealthy freedman. The scene is not overtly satirical, but Auerbach sees some similarities to satire in the greed of the guests and in Petronius’ use of socially specific Latin slang. By integrating his descriptions of the guests’ personalities, their style of speech, and the various ups and downs of their economic fortunes, Petronius achieves something that comes
close to realism. “Petronius’ literary ambition,” Auerbach argues, “like that of the realists of modern times, is to imitate a random, everyday, contemporary milieu with its sociological background, and to have his characters speak their jargon without recourse to any form of stylization.”\(^\text{16}\) Petronius, that is, sees the dinner guests against a constantly changing history. Satire sometimes exhibits “broad” realism like this, but it tends to be more concerned with attacking types rather than individuals, and these types usually appear against only a vague social background.\(^\text{17}\) While Auerbach finds Trimalchio’s dinner more realistic than satire, he also sees in Petronius the same limitations he sees in Horace, Juvenal, and Persius. In satire, he observes, “[n]o matter how many persons may be branded as given to vice or as ridiculous, criticism of vices and excess poses the problem as one for the individual; consequently, social criticism never leads to a definition of the motive forces within society.”\(^\text{18}\) Before Christianity, says Auerbach, there is no notion of historical forces that manifest themselves in the mundane details of daily life. Roman writers see only “vices and virtues, successes and mistakes.”\(^\text{19}\) Everything for them comes down to ethics rather than historical development. People are bad because they make bad choices, and those choices have nothing to do with things like economics, nationalism, inequality, gender, or the unfolding of some divine plan.

For modern readers, the obsession with ethics can make satires seem rather flat, which is probably what’s behind Lewis’ dismissal of both Elizabethan satire and its “shapeless Roman model.” Auerbach would reply that the impression of shapelessness is a symptom of his bigger thesis, that Christianity provided Western thought with a way to conceive of a truly historical perspective to everyday life, one that goes far beyond what can be seen in Greek and Roman writing. This, Auerbach asserts, was a spiritual and intellectual shift on the order of moving from two to three dimensions.\(^\text{20}\) After Christ’s incarnation as a lower-class person, it became possible to see events of world historical significance in the daily lives of average people. Through the life and death of Jesus, all earthly events take on a symbolic figural relationship with the eternal. There is no action, object, or thought that isn’t in some way part of the unfolding of Christian history.\(^\text{21}\) Events separated by millennia are suddenly connected by their figural involvement in grace. Auerbach spends hundreds of pages analyzing the transformation of the figural in Western literature, and I can’t do justice here to the full complexity of his argument. My point is that Auerbach’s figuralism shows us why ancient satire wasn’t a good fit for the literary tradition that
grew out of Christianity. Satire isolates individuals and turns them into ahistorical moral agents, while Christianity sees history coursing through everyday life.

However, Auerbach provides very little evidence for his claim that history as we know it is absent from Roman satire. His observations also fail to explain why so many Christian writers in the early modern period and beyond were fascinated by satire. It isn’t a coincidence that the young John Donne began his poetic career by imitating and adapting Horace. There is something more in Horace’s poetry than simplistic moralizing, something Donne saw as raw material for his own satiric explorations of the relationship between the ethical and the historical. Still, many of Horace’s satires do fit Auerbach’s characterization. “How comes it, Maecenas,” begins the speaker of satire 1.1, “that no man living is content with the lot which either his choice has given him or chance has thrown in his way, but each has praise for those who follow other paths?”

Enjoy what you have, and try not to envy others—this is the basic lesson of Horace’s *Sermones*, or “conversations,” as they are titled in Latin. His primary targets tend to be people who cannot control their desires, or people who go too far in suppressing them. Likening himself to Aristophanes and Lucilius, Horace defends his right to insult “anyone deserving to be drawn as a rogue and thief, as a rake or a cut-throat, or scandalous in any other way” (1.4.1-5). They deserve it because they’re responsible for their choices. But mockery alone does not make a satirist. To be a satirist, says Horace, “You also need a style [*et sermone opus est*] now grave, often gay, in keeping with the role now of orator or poet, at times of the wit, who holds his strength in check and husbands it with wisdom” (1.10.11-14). Satiric style switches constantly between seriousness, jokiness, and something Horace calls “*sermoni propiora*,” verse that is closer to speech or prose (1.4.41). Like his use of the word *sermo* to mean satire, style in general, and a particular aspect of his satiric style, Horace’s satire does a lot of different things. Yet he keeps those things separate, just as he seals off his targets from history.

There is one subject, however, that opens up a historical perspective largely absent from the rest of Horace’s poetry: himself. Horace talks about himself all the time in the satires, but his most interesting self-portrait appears in 1.6, a poem that’s an intriguing combination of mockery, autobiography, and moral and social philosophy. Speaking as himself, Horace praises his patron for choosing friends by merit rather than ancestry: “you, Maecenas, do not, like most of the world, curl up your nose at men of unknown birth, men like myself, a freedman’s son” (1.6.5-6). Although Maecenas is a patrician, he isn’t swayed by lineage. He believes that “it matters not
who a man’s parent is, if he be himself free-born” (8-9). What matters instead is “blamelessness of life and heart,” which has nothing to do with “a father’s fame” (64). Our friendship, the speaker tells Maecenas, is a credit to your judgment. Then Horace makes a surprising move. “If, to venture on self-praise,” he says, “my life is free from stain and guilt and I am loved by my friends—I owe this to my father” (69-71). Halfway through an argument on all the ways that personal merit trumps birth, Horace turns around and attributes his moral excellence to his father. He relates that his father, a tax collector in what is now Venosa, invested what little money he had in his son’s education. He took him to Rome to attend school with the sons of the elite and made sure that young Horace stayed “chaste” and “free from scandal” (82-84). His father’s moral and financial care provided Horace with opportunities normally closed to freedman—not just the chance to befriend someone like Maecenas, but also the command of a legion during the Roman civil war (45-48).

Even if he could, Horace says, he wouldn’t choose to trade places with the son of a patrician. Nobles have endless daily responsibilities and constantly have to keep up appearances. Horace’s days, by contrast, are relaxed and carefree:

Wherever the fancy leads, I saunter forth alone. I ask the price of greens and flour; often toward evening I stroll around the cheating Circus and the Forum. I listen to the fortune tellers; then homeward betake me to my dish of leeks and peas and fritters. My supper is served by three boys, and a white stone slab supports two cups with a ladle. By them stand a cheap salt-cellar, a jug and saucer of Campanian ware. Then I go off to sleep, untroubled with the thought that I must rise early on the morrow … [.

(111-120)

The disarming chattiness of this passage makes it easy to miss its implications. Horace has just traced a meandering path of causality linking his own personal moral character not simply to his father, but also to the specific socio-economic choices that a freedman tax collector could make for his son in 55 BCE. These choices create Horace the man, and they also reverberate through all of Roman history. Unlike his satiric targets, Horace doesn’t see himself as an ethical subject against a vague backdrop. Instead, he sees an ethical-historical subject whose thoughts and actions are his own, yet are also involved in everything from class, to taxes, to education, to the structure of the military, to the destruction of the republic, to fluctuating food prices, to slavery, all the way down to mundane details like what he eats for dinner and the dishes he has on his table. By writing about his moral identity, Horace ends up revealing his deep historical connection to everything in the Roman world, from the Emperor to a cheap salt caddy. His satire,
in other words, becomes what Auerbach calls an “imitation of reality,” a work of art that depicts the sensory experience of living in a world that has a history and is constantly changing.\textsuperscript{23}

Not all of Horace’s satires are as interesting as 1.6, but many of them hint at what I believe is his great innovation as a satiric poet. Horace demonstrates that satire can be used to mock people as well as think through the socio-historical significance of living a moral or immoral life. Though he lived before Persius and Juvenal, Horace had the last word on what Roman satire could do. He also had the first word on Elizabethan satire, because Thomas Drant’s 1567 translations of the \textit{Sermones} were among the first English satires to appear during Elizabeth’s reign.\textsuperscript{24} Like Donne, Drant dabbled in literature as a young man and spent the last twenty years of his life writing sermons at St. Paul’s.\textsuperscript{25} In the headnote to 1.6, he summarizes the poem as one in which “The Poet rebuketh those whiche do commend vices in the nobilitie, and do judge such worthie to bear rule, as also those whyche thinke, that none base born oughte to have any accesse to promotion.”\textsuperscript{26} In the original, Horace introduces the issue with a question addressed to Maecenas: \textit{“quid oportet / nos facere a volgo longe longeque remotos?”} or, “What, then, should we do, we who are set far, far above the vulgar?” (1.6.17-18). This is Drant’s rendering of the same lines:

\begin{quote}
If it be so that lawlesse prankes \\
Yea nobles, discommendeth: \\
Who will prayse us of baser blood \\
except our lyfe amendeth?
\end{quote}

In the Latin version, the speaker emphasizes that while he isn’t a patrician, he is still “far, far above the vulgar,” placing himself in an uncertain position between high and low. For Drant, there is no such ambiguity. There are nobles, and there are those of “baser blood.” Even when “promotion” is achieved through self-“ammend[ment],” true status remains a question of birth. Drant’s Horace is simply “baser” than his aristocratic audience, rather than being suspended between plebian and patrician. His translation redirects the poems’ inquiry about the about the social dimension of the speaker’s own morality. In Drant’s version, the satire is no longer about Augustus’ Rome; it’s about Elizabeth’s England.

In most of his translations, Drant makes Horace into a more conventional moralist than he really is. Neel Mukherjee argues that Drant’s Horace prefigures later “Horatianism,” in which poets and commentators sought to “monologize” the satirist in order extract simplistic lessons from
him and “to construct him as a sage passing acid judgment on human follies. Here is the complete fusion between *sermo* and ‘sermon,’ as the preacher’s voice drowns out the sly and teasing complexities of Horace’s conversations.”

In the sixth satire though, Drant does something a bit different. He doesn’t so much transform *sermo* into sermon as translate the complexities of the Roman class system into Elizabethan terms. In the original, Horace reminds his patron that during their first meeting he made no effort to impress him: “On coming into your presence I said a few faltering words, for speechless shame stopped me from saying more. My tale was not that I was a famous father’s son, not that I rode about my estate on a Saturnian steed: I told you what I was” (1.6.56-60). Drant turns Horace’s “*quod eram narro*” from “I told you what I was” into “I platly power [i.e., pour] out my mynde,”

which suggests something more personal than an account of his paternity. Although Drant simplifies Horace’s sense of his place in the social hierarchy, he sees Horace’s *quod eram* as more individuated than a set of social coordinates. Even as the possibilities for self-definition through class narrow in the Elizabethan rewrite, the possibilities for self-definition through interiority and moral self-cultivation expand. The important point is that Drant alters some of the particulars in order to ask the same kinds of questions about his own society that Horace had asked in order to see how ethics and social forces like class intersect in the life of a single person.

Drant, and Donne too, as I will try to show, represents a uniquely sixteenth-century Horatianism that differs from the Horatianism of Jonson in the seventeenth century and Pope in the eighteenth century. To some extent, Drant’s Horace fits the persona of a chatty country gentleman seeking the good life. He’s more than that though. For Drant, the main thing readers need to remember about Horace is that he is incredibly difficult: “Horace hymself is hard, and very hard … I can truly say of myne own experyence that I can soner translate twelve verses out of the greeke Homer, then five out of Horace.”

The later Horatianism of Jonson and the Augustans owed less to Horace himself than it did to vernacular imitations of his work by Ariosto, Alamani, and Wyatt. When these poets imitated Horace, they were imitating each other. Drant, by contrast, seems to be responding to Horace on his own. He not only shows no awareness of how Horace’s satires have been received, he treats them like a new discovery. For him, reading and adapting the satires is a demanding act of self-creation: “The poet is thus: sometymes he wadeth verye farre in fetchinge out his matter, and sometymes he is brittle, and soon broken of from his matter. So that thou muste be deepe witted to begyn with him and wel witted to take him with
thee. Thou must (gentle reader) bring in thy self help to the understandinge of him, and will lykewyse to thyne owne amendemente.” As Burrow puts it, Drant’s Horace is “a kind of Do It Yourself poet, whom you have to make for yourself, and in the process, perhaps, make a bit of yourself.” You have to be a good reader to tackle the challenge of Horace’s satires. In order to fully confront their strangeness, you have to “bring in” yourself and take the poems with you. To put it another way, Horace’s obsession with explaining what and who he is—a subject whose moral character is bound up with the same forces that shaped and continue to shape Roman civilization—provides an opportunity for early modern readers and poets to ask those same questions. And of all Horace’s imitators, Donne is the poet who most fully meets the challenge.

3 Histories of Vice

Donne’s satires get their ethical-historical depth from two sources: from Christian-figuralism, and, as I have been arguing, from Horace’s moments of realism. Before returning to “Satyre 3” to examine the implications for the search for true religion, I want to look at two of the other satires in order to provide a fuller sense of how Donne synthesizes the Christian and the Horatian. All five satires have interesting moments that deserve attention, but I’ll concentrate here on just the first two. In contrast to the fourth and fifth satires, each of these poems attacks a single target. This focus makes it easier to see the connections that Donne makes between their vices and the world they live in.

Donne’s first satire, which is about a walk with an extremely annoying companion, is loosely based on Horace’s satire 1.9. But unlike Horace and just about every other satirist, Donne’s speaker doesn’t attack his target in order to show how far short he falls of some ethical ideal. The satirist only seems to object to his friend’s vices to the extent that they make him difficult to control. Rather than trying to reform the fop’s moral character, the whole poem is the speaker’s struggle to keep him “hemmed in by me” (69). In one sense, he literally wants to prevent his friend from running away. In another sense, he’s trying to restrain his identity and keep it consistent and definable. Ultimately, the satirist fails to hem the fop into a clear relationship between “me” and “him.” Capturing that failure, however, is what makes “Satyre 1” an interesting poem. Instead of being about the loss of something, it’s about the desire for something that does not yet exist: a way to define someone neither at the top nor bottom of the early modern class hierarchy and who changes constantly depending on the company he keeps.
From the very beginning, Donne’s speaker is trying to know an unknowable person by distancing himself from him:

Away, thou changeling, motley humourist!
Leave me, and in this standing wooden chest,
Consorted with these few books, let me lie
In prison, and here be coffined when I die.

The satirist is desperate to separate himself from a highly unstable figure, a person who is an unpredictable “motley” of things both in terms of his appearance, and, as a “humourist,” his emotions. He calls him a changeling, a child whose true heritage is unknown and who could therefore be anyone. His unknowability is an affront to the speaker, who demands that the humourist not simply leave the room, but “Leave me,” leave so that he can regain his sense of self-consistency. His fear of being destabilized by the humourist makes the speaker wants to transform into a static inanimate object and be “consorted” with the books on his shelf. Being “consorted,” however, also means being mixed or even fused together. The speaker wants to think of himself as the opposite of his friend in every way, but when he imagines himself alone, the boundaries of his “me” are still in question.

As well as wanting to become a book, the speaker wants to be “consorted” with the knowledge books contain:

Here are God’s conduits, grave divines; and here
Nature’s secretary, the Philosopher;
And jolly statesmen, which teach how to tie
The sinews of a city’s mystic body;
Here, gathering chroniclers, and by them stand
Giddy, fantastic poets of each land.

Poets, despite placing last, are the only writers that don’t channel worldly knowledge. The others are conduits, secretaries, teachers, or, at worst, scavengers. They provide indirect access to their subjects of inquiry. Poets, on the other hand, are simply “giddy” and “fantastic.” Whatever they know must come out of their own fictions and uncertainties. And while they “stand” near the historians, their nature makes it impossible for them to stand anywhere for long, much like the humourist himself. Perhaps the parallel is what leads the speaker to reconsider his friend’s invitation. “Shall I leave all this constant company,” he asks, “And follow headlong, wild,
uncertain thee?” (11-12). Stanley Fish observes that the word “headlong” in line 12 could either be an adjective attached to “thee” or an adverb modifying the speaker himself. Ultimately, he says, “it is impossible to tell, and this impossibility faithfully reflects the absence of the difference the speaker repeatedly invokes.” In fact, any of the three adjectives referring to the humourist could apply to the speaker, who denies his resemblance to the humourist even as his syntax announces it. Like a giddy poet, the humourist’s inability to stand still might actually tell the speaker something important about himself.

But before the satirist will go, the humourist must agree to a few conditions. He has to promise not to leave the speaker in “the middle street” (15) when he sees a more “spruce companion,” like a captain “parcel-gilt” with money collected from dead pays (18), a “brisk, perfumed, pert courtier” (19), or a “velvet justice” known to have a “beauteous son and heir” (24). The street is full of irresistible opportunities for the humourist to advance himself financially, politically, and sexually. In most ancient and early modern satires, these figures of wealth and vanity would be targets too. Donne’s satirist focuses instead on the humourist because his vices illustrate the reciprocal corruption of self and society. The poem isn’t about the sins of ambition and vanity. It’s about how a society full of wealthy soldiers, courtiers, and justices, and yes, other humourists, requires the satirist’s friend to live a life of grinning and fawning, a life that has robbed him of an identity.

Figures like Donne’s shape-shifting humourist also appear in other Elizabethan satires. In John Marston’s Certaine Satyres, the speaker rails obsessively against them. “Ile snarle at those,” he warns, “which doe the world beguile / With masked showes. Ye changing Proteans list, / And tremble at a barking Satyrist.” Donne’s satirist has a much more complex relationship with his Protean target. His initial reaction to the invitation is to shout “Away!” and “Leave me!” but he soon softens to a less certain “Shall I?” and, once the humourist has agreed to give up his “vanities and giddinesses” (51), the scene ends with someone announcing “Come: let’s go” (52). It’s unclear who actually speaks these words, an ambiguity towards which the whole scene has been building. For the first time in the poem, the humourist and the satirist become an “us.” By the time he announces that they are “in the street,” they are a confirmed “we” (68). There, they quickly begin to separate again:

he first of all,
Improvidently proud, creeps to the wall,
And so imprisoned, and hemmed in by me
Sells for a little state his liberty.

(67-70)

As they walk, the humourist stays close to the wall, showing “all” that he is “first.” He exchanges his freedom for a very slight distinction. The power dynamic between the two figures remains in a constant state of transformation. Even though the humourist is “hemmed in” and unable to “skip forth” to meet every “painted fool” dressed in silk, “He them to him with am’rous smiles allures, / And grins, smacks, shrugs, and such an itch endures,” an itch that leads the speaker to compare him to “prentices or schoolboys which do know / Of some gay sport abroad, yet dare not go” (71-76). The simile is an attempt to cut the humourist down socially, to make him into a child or neophyte tradesman who must obey authority against his will. It’s another attempt to hem him in. But which is he more like, prentices or schoolboys? Moreover, is he like a group of them, or just one? The point of the simile is that the power relationship between the speaker and the humourist is nearly as difficult to define as the humourist himself. Just when he seems to be hemmed in, he slips away.

After several more encounters with courtiers, the satirist concedes that the humourist is ignoring him. His maniacal desire comes to a crisis when “At last, his love he in a window spies / And like light dew exhaled, he flings from me, / Violently ravished to his lechery” (106-108). A motion that seems to begin like a gentle vapour turns out to be the exact opposite of the way the lust-crazed humourist “flings” himself away from the speaker. As soon as a simile is deployed to describe him, he has already become something else. The humourist is not only lust-crazed, but “ravished to his lechery,” as though he is being raped by his own excessive libido. The implication is that his rushing toward the prostitute in the window in order to ravish her is at the same time a ravishing in which he has no agency. Rather than choosing vice, vice chooses him. The attempt to access his favourite prostitute brings about an apparent final victory for the speaker:

Many were there: he could command no more;
He quarreled, fought, bled, and, turned out of door,
   Directly came to me hanging the head,
And constantly a while must keep his bed.

(109-112)
He tries to fight his way through a crowd of johns, gets kicked out, and comes sheepishly back to the satirist. The humourist’s desire for “command,” for control, for individual agency, leaves him dejected in defeat. The uncontrollable figure now has to be “constant” company while he recovers from his injuries. But he only has to keep his bed constantly “awhile.” The humourist, that is, is at once an agent capable of making moral decisions (the wrong ones) about how to act in the social milieu of 1590s London, as well as a subject whose will is hemmed in by the way things are at a particular time and place in history. When the poem makes fun of him, it’s trying to understand this contradiction.

While Donne’s mutating humourist is a somewhat sympathetic take on the early modern status-seeker, “Satyre 2” offers a more sinister portrait of the struggle for success. Coscus the lawyer has no desire for a place in the existing social hierarchy. He seeks instead to enrich himself by seizing and destroying land, the capital on which the power of the elite is founded. Importantly, the speaker emphasizes that there’s nothing inherently wrong with the accumulation of capital. “[M]eans bless” (107), he says, and the elite have a responsibility to alleviate excessive inequality so that “None starve, none surfeit so” (109). The problem in “Satyre 2” comes down to the question of how and whom these means bless, to the way returns are obtained on property, in short, the means by which means bless. Coscus has no allegiance to the old order and has no interest in becoming a rentier. Instead, when he acquires land he immediately begins “Wringing each acre” (86) in order to extract everything he can from his capital. In Coscus, Donne offers a view of a society in which land has no use-value. The world he represents is a world in which everything becomes a temporary container for wealth, a world dominated by exchange value. In “Satyre 2,” an attack on the sins of one person is also a reflection on the future of capital.

Who exactly is Coscus? The satirist relates that he’s a successful poet-turned-lawyer (43-44). His most basic characteristic is that he’s always in excess, always beyond any metaphor used to describe him. Coscus’ vices are always “Worse” (64) and “More, more” (59) than anyone else’s. There are many kinds of sinners in the world: those who try “To out-swive dildoes, and out-usure Jews; / T’out-drink the sea, out-swear the Litany” (32-3), and even those who invent such strange new sins that “Schoolmen new tenements in Hell must make” (36). These sinners are characterized by excess as well, yet “these punish themselves: the insolence / Of Coscus only breeds my great offence” (39-40). What makes Coscus so much worse is his “insolence,” which
seems like a mild flaw compared to what the satirist has just described. Somehow though, insolence is the “only” basis for the speaker’s “great offence.”

Most instances of insolence from the sixteenth century fall under the first two senses provided by the *OED*: “Pride; haughty or overbearing conduct or disposition,” or, “Offensive contumaciousness of action or speech due to presumption.” Then as now, insolence described either excessive pride in general or a particular example of arrogant behavior. Yet dictionaries in the period often give priority to a less common sense of insolence, one closer to the Latin adjective insolens, or “unaccustomed.” Thomas Elyot’s 1538 Latin-English dictionary puts this sense first, defining Insolentia as “seldomnes of vse in any thynge. vnhauntynge of a place. Also presumption[,] wanton pride.” In the revised edition of *Huloet’s Dictionarie* (1572), the main entry for “Seldomness, or wante of vsage” offers only one Latin equivalent: “Insolentia, ae.” John Vernon and Ralph Waddington define insolentia as that “which is not wont to do something, that is not in use, unwont, arrogant, and proud, which can endure with no body,” and John Barret’s *Quadruple Dictionary* (1580) gives insolens as the Latin equivalent for the combined English senses of “Not wont, or accustomed; hautie; arrogant; presumptuous; not taking it as he hath done.”

By the end of the century, insolent was being used frequently to describe both unfamiliar behavior and unfamiliar language. In a 1594 lecture on Jonah 1:2, the theologian John King explains that even if Jonah had cried out inside Niniveh rather than, as God commanded, outside the city, he still “vvould haue dravvne the vvonder of the people vppon [him], to haue seene a matter so insolent and seldome vsed.” The grammarian John Brinsley, meanwhile, uses the word to offer advice on good prose style: “Words which are insolent, hard and out of vse, are to be as warily auoided, as rockes of Marinners.” Donne’s only other use of the word is in a late essay that blames a mistranslation in the Greek Septuagint on “the hardness and insolence of the Phrase.” To Donne and his contemporaries, insolence still meant pride and arrogance, but the influence of the word’s Latin etymology also allowed it to describe words and people that were new, bizarre, unfamiliar, and difficult to understand. In many ways though, all the early modern senses of insolence describe the same thing. Insolence is always the disruption of some form of order, whether social, moral, behavioral, or linguistic. Insolent things go beyond, exceeding or even destroying the customary framework for understanding them.
In Coscus, all the Renaissance meanings of insolence are active at once. He’s ambitious and presumptuous in his quest for wealth, he exceeds comparison with even the worst sinners, and his sins have serious social implications. Moreover, a key aspect of his unethical behavior is his use of insolent language, the incomprehensible legalese with which he defrauds his victims. Donne is vague on how exactly Coscus’ scheme works, but he is clearly making fraudulent use of his legal knowledge to enrich himself:

But when he sells or changes lands, he impairs
His writings, and (unwatched) leaves out ‘ses heirs’,
As slyly as any commenter goes by
Hard words or sense; or in divinity
As controverters in vouched texts leave out
Shrewd words which might against them clear the doubt.

(97-102)

It’s hard to tell what Coscus’ precise role is in these deals. Whether he does it for himself or for a client, when Coscus draws up a new deed he omits the section that deals with ses heirs, a phrase from Law French that grants an estate to a tenant “and his heirs forever.” In other words, he breaks the entail to give the landholder more power over his estate. Gregory Kneidle observes that this is what “dynastic-minded landholders had also been doing for several generations.”

The sixteenth century had seen the increasing use of complicated legal schemes to subvert entailments, ostensibly for the purpose of securing family property. Yet what Coscus does also endangers the very existence of the dynastic landed family. By removing the heirs from the deed, Coscus creates an estate that is only valuable in the short term. Heirless land would likely revert to the crown on the landholder’s death, so his client might as well do what Coscus does and “wring” the land for all it is worth. Land that was once long-term rent-producing capital is transformed into a temporary repository for value, value that will be immediately extracted and converted into money.

Coscus is insolent: he corrupts the language of the law to liberate capital that would otherwise be protected for hereditary transmission within families. Still, “Satyre 2” is not an attack on wealth or even inequality. Instead, it is an attempt to understand the relationship between the behavior of one particularly egregious sinner and a historical change in the nature of land capital, specifically its transformation from a rent-producing asset into a resource for immediate liquidation. Like Horace’s use of satire to try to explain “quod eram,” Donne is using satire to explore the question of who and what Coscus is. Coscus is a silly lawyer-poet and, at the same
time, a threat that the speaker takes very seriously. He is somewhere between Jonson’s Voltore and a more sinister figure like Shakespeare’s Edmund, a character whose self-interest poses an existential danger to his society. Coscus demonstrates the link between historical change and the morality of individuals, a connection perceived by Horace, but that Donne takes much farther than any classical poet.

The scale of the threat Coscus represents is finally revealed in the last verse paragraph of the poem: “Where are those spread woods which clothed heretofore / These bought lands? Not built, nor burnt within door. / Where th’old landlord’s troops and alms?” (103-105). These questions are nostalgic for a world of pure use value. In the ideal regime of the “old landlord,” the woods either beautified the estate or were consumed to build and heat it. The value of resources lay in their direct local utility, not in their market value. Now, the lands have been stripped, and the woods that once decently “clothed” them have been sold elsewhere. Not only has the new owner sold off most of the land’s resources, he has also done away with “troops” and “alms,” words that Donne uses as shorthand for the whole system of manorial life dating back to the early middle ages. The previous landlord was a landlord, not an owner. He maintained his troops of servants and tenants. Through alms he showed an awareness of his responsibilities toward the poor on his estate. Once the land is bought, noblesse oblige disappears. The new owner behaves more like a private equity firm than an aristocratic rentier with an interest in stability. Coscus and people like him are disturbing the equilibrium of inequality that supported the traditional elite and, by exploiting capital in a new way, bringing a new kind of inequality into existence.

The last lines of the poem move even farther from the particular insolence of Coscus to the broader consequences of treating land as temporary storage for wealth rather than the foundation of wealth itself. They also remind the reader that this satire isn’t an attack on the rich just because they are rich:

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In great halls
Carthusian fasts and fulsome Bacchanals
Equally I hate: means bless; in rich men’s homes
I bid kill some beasts, but not hecatombs.
None starve, none surfeit so. But, oh, we allow
Good works as good but out of fashion now,
Like old, rich wardrobes.
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(105-111)
Hester sees this moment as an argument for a return to national communal charity in order to resist Coscus’ “uncreating word.” I read it differently, but I agree that these lines are as much about the future as they are about the past. The key to the passage is the ambiguous assertion that “means bless.” What exactly are “means”? Is the speaker talking about the middle way between miserliness and “melting in luxury,” or a balance between the “old landlord” and someone like Coscus? Furthermore, “means” is not only the concept of the middle, but, as the OED illustrates, wealth and capital itself. “Means bless,” then, means that on balance material inequality is beneficial for English society. It makes possible things like “troops and alms.” At the same time, Donne’s satirist recognizes a change, a kind of insolence in the nature of means resulting from the conversion of land capital into financial assets by people like Coscus. And like Coscus himself, this change is too insolent to be fully understood. Its consequences, however, are already becoming apparent. Although it seems like an exaggeration earlier in the poem, by the end there are legitimate reasons to worry that Coscus or someone like him will soon, like the sea, “compass all our land / From Scots to Wight, from Mount to Dover strand” (77-78). It would be a kind of second conquest, resulting in a very different England.

“Satyre 2” is intriguing because it depicts its target as personally ridiculous and socially dangerous in almost equal measure. It mocks the corruption of a single egregious individual while suggesting that his activities are part of a fundamental change in the structure of his society. In the poem’s final couplet the satirist claims, “my words none draws / Within the vast reach of th’huge statute-laws” (111-112), which Patterson reads as a reference to the 1581 act against seditious publications (23 Eliz. ca. 2), a law that would not apply to Donne’s satires because they circulated only in manuscript. There is also another reason the satirist can be confident of escaping accusations of slander. Notwithstanding critical efforts to identify him, Coscus is not a real person. He is a fiction, a way of thinking through a form of insolence that challenges the existing order and hints at a disastrous but still inscrutable future. Satire for Donne, as for Horace, is a way to make fun of people who do bad things. At the same time, Donne’s poem sees vice from a historical perspective that is absent in most ancient and early modern satires. Coscus is interesting, that is, because he is both morally and historically insolent. He is a figure straight out of city comedy, but his ability to transform the economic power of the elite rivals that of a monarch. The poem does not set out to solve a problem so much pose one.
What do you make of someone who can “lie in everything / Like a king’s favourite—yea, like a king” (69-70)?

4 Landscapes of Railing

Near the end of “Satyre 3,” Donne presents two images that vividly illustrate the poem’s struggle. The first is the hill of truth:

On a huge hill,
   Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
   Reach her, about must, and about go,
   And what the hill’s suddenness resists, win so.

(79-82)

The image of truth on a steep hill appears in many classical texts. It also appears in Thomas Drant’s introduction to his translation of Horace. To those who say that Horace’s satires are a distraction from the gospels, Drant offers this reply: “He that woulde come to the upmost top of an highe hill, not beinge able directly to go foreward for the steapnes thereof, if he step a foot or twayne, or more oute of the waye, it is not out of the waye for that it is a more conveyghable way to the top of the hill.” Reading satire means leaving the straight path to God’s truth. But since Horace’s poems are morally sound, reading them is actually a way of staying on track. Donne’s version is even less direct. Instead of a crooked path leading to the gospels, Donne’s path spirals toward a truth that the poem itself never reaches. The only truth that the poem finds is the nature of the path itself. “Convinced at first,” writes John Lauritsen, “that he could, with every expectation of final success, seek the realm of pure spirit, the splendid isolation of the hilltop, the speaker instead discovers—to his great unease, we may be sure—that he must always be seeking, climbing, and never reaching.” The path that winds around the hill concretizes what the satirist has been doing all along. Like his attacks on bad faith, the path wanders in a way that remains carefully directed. It strays into radical territory in order to find an authority to follow, and circles around and around somewhere between the bottom and the top. To put it another way, it rails, and railing, in both the literal and figurative sense, articulates the speaker’s sense that the way to true religion is both “plain t’all eyes” and far too “dazzling” to see (88).

The closest thing “Satyre 3” has to a moral is the speaker’s advice to “Keep the truth which thou has found” (89). After the tortuous self-strangulation of the previous eighty lines or so, this
cheery platitude is a bit surprising, to say the least. Depending on which word you emphasize, however, “truth” or “thou,” line 89 means something very different, and that difference turns out to be one of the central ambiguities of the poem. “[O]n one reading,” Strier explains, “the aim is to keep that part or aspect of truth that you have managed to recognize … ; on the other reading, you are to keep what has impressed you as the truth.” When the speaker reaches the top of the hill, it is unclear what he will have won. Will it be the capital-t Truth, or will it merely be the truth that he was capable of finding? To the extent that “Satyre 3” finds any truth at all, it is the truth about the difficulty of knowing what is true. Satire is suited to expressing this problem because contradictions between power and resistance, truth and truths, straight and wandering paths, and objective and subjective knowledge are the very things that enable it to speak. Railing doesn’t solve problems of knowledge. It creates art out of the epistemological obstacles that prevent them from being solved. To answer the speaker’s initial question, railing is not the cure for but rather the poetry of “worn maladies.”

Donne’s satirist argues that maintaining the search for truth is more important than actually succeeding. Moral and spiritual courage, however, are not what make the search so crucial. Its importance comes instead from Donne’s understanding of the individual Christian as a simultaneously spiritual, intellectual, moral, and historical being. Over and over again, “Satyre 3” reveals connections between the world of the individual and the world of history, most obviously in its preoccupation with preserving active faith against the pressures of living in a particular time and place. The people the satirist worries most about are the ones who fail to recognize their passive submission to the contingent forces that make their religious choices for them. These forces include everything from personality quirks, as in the case of Phrygius and Gracchus, to institutional authority:

Fool and wretch! Wilt thou let thy soul be tied
To man’s laws, by which she shall not be tried
At the last day? Oh, will it then boot thee
To say a Philip or a Gregory,
A Harry or a Martin taught thee this?

(93-97)

At Judgment Day, it will be useless to argue that you chose your faith because a priest or a king told you it was the right one. Donne’s satirist is nostalgic for what the ancient satirists could take for granted—that one person’s ethical choices had nothing to do with history. Such
distinctions are no longer possible. In the era of grace, even the most mundane aspects of life are pervaded with historical meaning. As Donne puts it in the fifth satire, “If each thing each thing implies or represents, / Then man is a world” (12-13). True religion can only be found by rejecting the contingencies of human history. But if each thing represents each thing, if the satirist’s inner life is mixed up with forces outside of him, it becomes impossible to ever really block out the world. How can you know the truth when every thought, object, and action presents you with just one damn thing after another?

Donne’s satirist, that is, is trying to speak the truth while constantly choking on history. As we saw in the poem’s first lines, this is the paradox of railing. When a satirist rails, he speaks his inability to speak. Similarly, the straightest path up the hill of truth is the one that rails, the one that seems to wander uselessly. But the hill of truth is only one of the topographical metaphors that conclude the poem. Another aspect of Donne’s railing appears in the stream of power, which the speaker presents as a lesson on how to “rightly obey pow’r” by knowing its “bounds” (100):

As streams are, pow’r is: those blest flow’rs that dwell
At the rough stream’s calm head thrive and do well,
But having left their roots, and themselves given
To the stream’s tyrannous rage, alas are driven
Through mills, rocks and woods, and at last,
Almost consumed in going, in the sea are lost:
So perish souls which more choose men’s unjust
Pow’r, from God claimed, than God himself to trust.

(103-110)

All power flows from God, and those who make idols of human authority get chewed up and spit out into oblivion. Oddly though, until the last two lines explain what the stream means, it isn’t at clear that this is an argument about God’s power. The satirist could just as easily be describing the dangers of seeking true religion: those who question the truth claims of kings and popes are destroyed in the “tyrannous rage” of the water. And in fact, when the image of the stream returns in the fifth satire, it has been stripped of any spiritual meaning. Instead, it becomes a way of imagining how power flows from monarchs to judges. “Pow’r of the courts below / Flow from the first main head,” says the speaker of “Satyre 5,” “and these can throw / Thee, if they suck thee in, to misery, / To fetters, halters” (45-48). The satirist’s explanation, Donne makes it rather difficult to know whether the stream is an argument about human or divine power. But the argument is not the point. The point is, instead, the confusion that the simile creates for the
reader. The ambiguity of the stream is a poetic performance of the problem that the satirist has been struggling with all along: the impossibility of sifting God from the sediment of history.

Railing, as I have been arguing, does three main things in “Satyre 3.” First, it maps the limits of what can be known by offering words and ideas that obviously contradict or “choke” themselves. Second, it wanders in its quest for the truth: it rebels in the interests of obedience, and breaks down boundaries between the self and the world even as the speaker wishes it weren’t so easy to do so. Finally, and most importantly, Donne’s railing is art. “Satyre 3” is a fiction that illustrates why it is so hard to find true religion. If railing is in any way unique among other kinds of fictions, its uniqueness lies in the way it draws strength from recognizing that the truth is beyond its reach.

Donne’s satirist sets out in “Satyre 3” to find the right faith. He ends up doing something much more interesting. He writes a poem that reaches continually toward true religion while it illustrates the futility of trying to separate truth from the intrusions of history. In Horace’s satires, the historical and the individual were kept separate, although his self-reflections show signs of recognizing the involvement of the ethical subject in a changing world. When Donne takes up Horace’s style, the flat world of sinners surrounding the satirist takes on a new historical depth. Men like Coscus and the humourist act and are acted upon by economic, political, and social forces bigger than themselves. “Satyre 3,” as I have argued, shows the dark side of Christian figuralism and the way it makes it possible for European writers to conceive of historical forces welling up from the lives of ordinary individuals and linking together disparate people, objects, and events. Everything is immanent in everything else, but Donne’s satirist can’t take comfort in this notion because he realizes that it puts impossible demands on active faith. Salvation could be the thing that gets him damned, because it turns out to be the biggest obstacle to recognizing true religion, the one faith that is not simply a product of contingency. Far from being an impediment to poetry, however, futility, immobility, and constriction are what let the satirist speak. In Donne’s satires, such feelings are a beginning rather than an end.

While John Marston could accuse Joseph Hall of writing satires full of “darke Enigmaes, and strange ridling sence / Which passe my dullard braines intelligence,” Donne’s third satire does not defy the reader to “vmaske the Satyres secresie.” Marston, *Certaine Satyres*, 2.30-34.

Leishman, 116.


Shakespeare, for example, puns on these two senses of “kind” in Hamlet’s comment that Claudius is “A little more than kin and less than kind.” William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* [CHECK]


Hester, 11.

Scodel 483.

The *OED* has five different main entries the verb “rail,” which I summarize briefly in chapter 1. The various homonyms of “rail” have different and often uncertain origins, and only a few of them derive from the Latin *regulare*, to rule. The specifically satiric sense of “rail” is relatively recent, a late 15th century importation of the French *railler* (to brag, boast, or bark). Combining and overlapping with the other meanings of “rail,” including those derived from *regulare*, gave the word a peculiar range of contradictory senses. Its overall ability to mean both submission and resistance powerfully captured the complexities of satire for many early modern poets, including Skelton, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Marston, Jonson, and others.

Strier, 134.

By contrast, Thomas V. Moore argues this passage is directed squarely at “the individual and his too easy acceptance of authority in order to avoid facing the awesome demands of a constant and active religious faith.” Thomas V. Moore, “Donne’s Use of Uncertainty as a Vital Force in ‘Satyre III,’” *Modern Philology* 67 (1969), 41.

A recent example is Sean Davidson’s reading of “Satyre 3”: “There is one way to ‘true religion’ and it has something to do with paternal authority, and yet somehow it does not require adherence to one narrowly defined set of doctrines or allegiance to one particular religious faction against all others. Rather, it entails rootedness in a church community as well as an ongoing intensive exploration of religious truth within the horizon of authority and tradition. Along with Scripture, the present voices of authority and the past voices of tradition provide important fiduciary parameters within which to search for religious truth.” Sean Davidson, “‘Stand in the way’: Seeking True Religion in John Donne’s *Satyre III,*” *John Donne Journal* 30 (2011), 88-89.

John Donne senior (c.1535-1575) was a successful London iron merchant. His personal and professional connections suggest that, like Donne’s mother, he was a staunch Catholic. Donne also had a stepfather, a wealthy Catholic physician named John Symyngs who married Donne’s mother Elizabeth in 1576. He died in 1588, when Donne was in his late teens. Almost nothing is known about the Donne’s grandfather. Donne himself seems to have believed that he was descended from the Dëws of Kidwelly, one of the gentle Welsh families that fought with Owain Glyndwr in the early fifteenth century. If true, it is not clear how or why his father’s branch of the family ended up in London as tradespeople. For the scant evidence about Donne’s father’s family, see R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1970), 21-22, 26-34; Denis Flynn, *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility* (Bloomington: Indiana


17 Ibid., 30.
18 Ibid., 32.
19 Ibid., 38.
20 Ibid., 33.
21 Ibid., 41-49.

23 Auerbach 191.

24 Drant’s translations of Horace’s satires first appeared in *A Medicinable Morall, that is, the Two Bookes of Horace his Satyres Englyshed* (1566), which also included some of Drant’s own poems. The following year, Drant had the satires reprinted with his translations of other works by Horace in *Horace his Arte of poetrie, Pistles and Satyrs Englished*.


27 Drant, *Horace*, 193, lines 32-34.

29 Drant, *Horace*, 195.
30 Drant, “To the Reader,” 11.


33 Burrow, 28.

35 Schiller famously asserted that satire always about “the contradiction between reality and the ideal.” The satirist attacks some aspect of reality, in this case the manipulative insincerity of courtesy personified in his friend the “humourist,” in order express his “burning desire” for an implied ideal that has been lost. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Naïve and Sentimental in Literature*, trans. Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly (Manchester: Carcanet, 1981), 43-45.
Although it secured inheritance, ses heirs also restricted the power of the estate holder to disinherit a bad heir. According to Francis Bacon, it freed the heir to “grow insolent in vice knowing that there could be no check of disinheritance over him.” Francis Bacon, The Use of the Law, in The Works of Francis Bacon, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath (London, 1861), vol. 7, 490.


For a specific account of such schemes, see Baker’s discussion of uses, 283-93. The estate holder (the “feoffor”) would sign over title to a group of friends or lawyers (the “feoffees”).
for the use of a beneficiary, usually the original owner himself or one of his heirs. Strangely, by handing the title to someone else, the landowner became practically the absolute owner of his property, far beyond what common law allowed. He was, as Baker points out, “released from the most burdensome incidents of feudalism, and from the inflexible rules of inheritance, and the estate was also freed from claims by the widow to dower” (289). Henry VIII’s Statue of Uses put a stop to the scheme by creating a legal equivalence between possession and use. After 1536, the use of land could no longer be separated from possession of it.

52 Hester, 49.
55 Kneidel, for example, reads Coscus as the jurist Edward Coke (114).
56 See Milgate, 290-292.
57 Drant, “To the Reader,” 8.
58 Lauritsen, John R. “Donne’s Satyres: The Drama of Self-Discovery,” SEL 16 (1976), 127.
59 Strier, 154.
60 Henry VIII and Philip II personify state power in this passage, while religious authority is represented by Martin Luther and “Gregory,” most likely Gregory the Great (504-604). He could also be Gregory VII, or Gregory XIII, or Gregory XIV. Whoever he is, the point is that Donne is using the name to represents the power of the Catholic Church. See Robins, note to line 96.
61 See Auerbach, 43.
Chapter 3
Spenser’s Broken Idol

1 What’s Wrong with Satyrane?

While travelling in Germany in the summer of 1798, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote detailed letters to his friends back in England. When he published the letters eleven years later, Coleridge added a preface claiming they were written by a deceased Cambridge classmate known as “Satyrane, the Idoloclast,” a name borrowed from the half-satyr knight of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene.*¹ In an introductory poem, Coleridge explains the nickname:

So call him, for so mingling blame with praise
And smiles with anxious looks, his earliest friends,
Masking his birth-name, wont to character
His wild-wood fancy and impetuous zeal[.][²]

Instead of wandering the forests of Faery Land, Coleridge’s Satyrane wandered the forests of learning: “not a hidden path that to the shades / Of the belov’d Parnassian forest leads, / Lurk’d undiscover’d by him.”³ A poet and philosopher, Satyrane was just as devoted to “ancient truth” as he was to smashing the “worthless Idols” of his time.⁴ He was a mix of opposites, equally prone to praise and blame, smiling and worrying, creativity and zealousness, wildness and cultivation. Most importantly, Satyrane is associated with the intersection of literature and knowledge. For Coleridge, Satyrane was a satirist.

But how much of a satirist is Spenser’s original character in *The Faerie Queene?* Satyrane’s first appearance comes in Book 1, Canto 6, when he helps Una escape from a tribe of satyrs. On their way out of the wood, Una and Satyrane encounter Sansloy, an evil Saracen who attempted to rape Una earlier in the canto. Along with his brothers Sansfoy and Sanjoy, Sansloy is one of the Redcrosse Knight’s primary adversaries. Satyrane, by contrast, is “Plaine, faithful, true, and enemy of shame.”⁵ When Satyrane and Sansloy fight, however, Spenser erases their differences. The speaker compares them to “two Bores with rankling malic met” (1.6.44). The simile doesn’t distinguish between the bores, implying that, for the moment at least, Sansloy and Satyrane are somehow alike. Their loss of distinction becomes literal in the next stanza, when they’re both so covered with “blody gore” that, “both deformed, [they] scarestly could be known” (1.6.45). It’s impossible to tell them apart, and Una doesn’t wait around to find out which is which.
Why can’t Satyrane hold onto Una, and why does he end up indistinguishable from a would-be rapist? One explanation for Satyrane’s failure is that he’s supposed to function as an inferior substitute for Redcrosse. More accurately, he’s the last in a series of guardians who protect Una after Redcrosse has abandoned her. The first is a lion, whose instinct to kill Una is tamed by her “simple truth” (1.3.6), and who serves as her “strong guard” (1.3.9) until the end of Canto 3, when he’s killed by Sansloy. Una’s next guardians, the satyrs, are halfway between man and animal. They have an instinct for “barbarous truth” (1.6.12) which allows them to sense Una’s importance. Those same instincts, however, quickly lead them to turn her into a false idol. Her next guardian, and the last before she encounters Arthur, is Satyrane. Satyrane is a knight, but he bridges the world of chivalry with the world of nature because he’s the child of a satyr father and a human mother. He too fails Una. Worse, he ends up looking just like Sansloy. It’s not until Una meets Arthur in Canto 7 that the narrative begins to move forward again: by freeing Redcrosse from Orgoglio’s dungeon, Arthur sets in motion the process of redemption that will allow Redcrosse to slay the dragon terrorizing Una’s kingdom. In some ways, then, Una’s beastly and semi-beastly guardians are only there to serve as contrasts to Arthur and Redcrosse. The lion doesn’t even survive for one canto, and the satyrs reappear only once more in the epic, during the Malbecco interlude of Book 3. Satyrane, however, isn’t a throwaway character. Not only does Spenser give us a detailed account of his childhood, he returns several times in subsequent books of the poem. Clearly, there’s something about Satyrane that Spenser finds interesting.

That something, as Coleridge noticed, is satire. Admittedly, Satyrane doesn’t act like a conventional satirist. His behaviour almost always conforms with knightly decorum, and he doesn’t have any angry speeches that sound like Juvenal. However, he’s also part satyr and, as I explained in the introduction, Elizabethan poets and critics believed that the conventions of verse satire originated in the satyr plays of Ancient Greek drama. The link between satyrs and satire is one reason why the period’s satirists are so often associated with forests and animals. Sometimes the association is literal, like Shakespeare’s Jaques, and sometimes it’s simply metaphorical, like Marston’s Kinsayder. The point is that even though Satyrane and the satyrs aren’t satirists in any obvious way, they’re part of a cluster of ideas inextricably linked with satire in early modern thought: forests, human-animal hybrids, and the idea that you have to step way from society in order to understand it.
Other than his first appearance in Book 1, which I’ll come back to, the episode that best demonstrates Satyrane’s association with satire is his fight with the hyena-like creature that pursues Florimell in Book 3. Created by an evil witch, the hyena is sent to capture or kill Florimell for rejecting the advances of the witch’s lecherous son. Though it looks like a hyena, the speaker emphasizes that “neuer yet did liuing eye detect” such an animal, and that it “feeds on womens flesh, as others feede on gras” (3.7.22). It’s an animal, and it’s also an embodiment of the destructive aspects of male desire. The beast finally catches up with Florimell near the sea. While she escapes in a fishing boat, the hyena kills and eats her exhausted horse. Just then, a “goodly Swaine” rides by, a man who rejects “vaine sheows” and who “rather ioyd to be, then seemen sich” (3.7.30). The next stanza reveals that the swain is Satyrane, which ironizes the claim that he’s exactly what he seems to be. The last time we saw Satyrane, he was indistinguishable from Sansloy. Instead of an opposition between an evil beast and a good knight, Spenser sets up a struggle between an animal associated with lust and a satyr-knight who, as we’ve already learned, isn’t entirely what he seems to be.

Satyrane thinks that the beast has killed Florimell, so he attacks it. He quickly realizes, however, that his weapons are only making it stronger. In a move that recalls Arthur’s battle with Maleger in Book 2, Satyrane throws down his weapons, tackles the hyena, and begins to bludgeon it with his fists. Finally, the beast “his fierceness gan abate, / And meekly stoup vnto the victour strong” (3.7.35). Satyrane then binds the hyena with a golden ribbon that was once tied around the waist of Florimell. The implication is that Satyrane is forcing the hyena into a proper relationship with physical beauty. The delicate ribbon associated with Florimell doesn’t reignite his desire to feed on women’s flesh. Instead, it seems to have a restraining, civilizing effect. As in most satire, it’s not clear that force is an effective tool for instilling virtue. Still, for the moment at least, Satyrane does seem to have morally transformed the hyena. Trembling like a lamb, it follows him along the shore “As he had long bene learned to obay” (3.7.36). Then Satyrane gets distracted. The giantess Argante rides by with Palladine in pursuit, and Satyrane leaves his “captiue Beast at liberty” (3.7.38). When he comes back, he discovers that the hyena has escaped: “he had broke his band, / And was return’d againe vnto his Dame, / To tell what tydings of faire Florimell became” (3.7.61). As soon as Satyrane takes his eye off the hyena, it breaks the ribbon and goes back to being an agent of rapacious desire.
The hyena episode leaves a lot unexplained. For one thing, the scene has no narrative function whatsoever. Florimell has already escaped, and the hyena is only temporarily delayed. Another issue is that the episode results entirely from a mistake. Satyrane sees a hyena eating Florimell’s horse and concludes, incorrectly, that Florimell has been eaten too. There’s also the odd parallel with Arthur’s battle with Maleger, the ghoul-lish figure of mortality who lays siege to the Castle of Alma in Book 2. Like the hyena, Maleger can’t be killed with weapons. To destroy him, Arthur has to strangle him and throw his body into a lake. After the battle though, Arthur nearly succumbs to his wounds, the same kind of bodily decay that Maleger represented. Arthur’s victory over Maleger is qualified, but it’s still a victory, and he quickly regains his health with the help of Alma. In the case of the hyena, Satyrane has merely beaten it into temporary submission. When Arthur kills Maleger, it becomes possible to imagine that temperance and holiness can overcome decay and death. Not only does Satyrane fail to kill the hyena, he ends up letting it get away. As in Book 1, Satyrane’s cameo prompts more questions than answers. Why does Satyrane make his initial interpretive error? Why is his victory over the hyena so fleeting? And why does Spenser set up the unfavourable parallel with Arthur?

We can start to answer some of these questions by recognizing that the weirdness of Satyrane proceeds from the way that Spenser understands satire. To put it concisely, Spenser sees satire as a form of literature that interrogates what counts as knowledge. As a formal category, the word “satyre” probably meant for Spenser what it meant for the rest of his contemporaries: morally didactic poetry of the kind written by Horace, Juvenal, and Persius. But in Spenser’s work satire is also mixed up with another literary category: complaint, a kind of vernacular satire that developed during the middle ages and continued to thrive well into the sixteenth century. In an influential study, John Peter says that complaint consists of “the vast medieval literature of reproof,” ranging from works like Piers Plowman to poems just a few lines long. Although individual complaints can differ greatly from one another, Peter says that every complaint is basically “an estimate, in verse, of the discrepancy between biblical injunction and contemporary practice.” Unlike classical satires, which sometimes feel like direct personal attacks, complaints deal with impersonal issues like human frailty and institutional decline. They tend to be allegorical, stylistically diverse, and, assuming the right person or deity takes action, also quite optimistic about the chances for reform.
Peter’s account is a good starting-place for thinking about complaint in Spenser’s poetry, even though Peter himself believes that Spenser is irrelevant to the tradition. What Spenser borrows from the poetry of complaint isn’t so much a set of formal principles as a particular attitude towards the problems that interest him. We can get a better sense of this attitude by looking at what the word “complaint” meant during Spenser’s lifetime. Then as now, a complaint was an expression of suffering or dissatisfaction. In its most common non-literary sense, it was a statement of an injury to be redressed by law. The legal sense of “complaint” highlights a key difference between complaint poetry and more familiar forms of satire. Classical satirists often assert that their poems have the power to correct the vices they attack. Complainers, by contrast, foreground the fact that they can’t fix the things they’re unhappy about. In a complaint, the power to punish evil lies not with poets, but with judges, bishops, princes, or, finally, God. The major difference between Spenser’s complaints and those that Peter includes in the tradition is that Spenser’s aren’t just about political or ecclesiastical issues. They’re also about the epistemological assumptions his speakers make when they try to defend their truth claims. As the rest of this essay will try to show, these poems are all preoccupied on some level with the single biggest epistemological issue of the late sixteenth century: the emerging split between art and science. Spenser’s complaints are about people who don’t understand this distinction and, as a result, end up compounding their own confusion. Spenser doesn’t claim to have the answers to the questions he raises. By showing poetically that there’s something wrong with the way knowledge has worked since antiquity, he’s asking the reader to consider whether there might be other ways of knowing things.

2 Spenser and Science

Although Spenser was writing decades before the advent of modern science, European attitudes toward nature were already undergoing a major transformation during his lifetime. The change was more or less complete by the middle of the seventeenth century, and Bruno Latour argues that we can see it most clearly by comparing the lab experiments of Robert Boyle with the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. Latour sees Boyle and Hobbes as modernity’s founding fathers because each disguises the political from the scientific. Between them, Boyle and Hobbes establish the principle that the representation of nature belongs to science, and that the representation of human societies belongs to politics. Their desire to keep man and nature
separate, says Latour, is one of the basic features of modernity. Modern thought tries to “purify” the world by placing nature and culture at opposite poles. Anything that appears to violate this binary has to be explained away by separating the parts attributable to human agency from the parts attributable to nature. Modernity doesn’t allow for hybrids. However, Latour says that the work of purifying nature and culture also creates a problem. Modern thought wants to get rid of hybrids, but it also notices greater and greater numbers of hybrids that have to be debunked. The proliferation of hybrids eventually precipitates a crisis that requires a rethinking of modernity itself, which is what Latour proposes to do in his intellectual project. For our purposes, the important thing about Latour’s work is that it posits the end of the Renaissance as the moment when Europeans no longer see the world as a single contiguous “nature-culture.”

Prior to this shift to modern thought, many Europeans believed that god, man, and nature were linked together by an infinite chain of resemblances. Much like Latour, Michel Foucault argues that this epistemological model, or “episteme,” came to an end when natural philosophers began to see difference and separation as the key to understanding how the world works, rather than similitude and contiguity. Foucault and Latour’s arguments also differ in some important ways that are too complex for me to address here. The important commonality between them is that they both see the attempts of early science to distinguish man from nature as the beginning of a new cultural phase.

The epistemological changes taking place during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods didn’t just interest natural philosophers. Poets too were fascinated by the way old methods of studying nature seemed to be losing viability, even when it wasn’t clear what would replace them. Katherine Eggert observes that writers wanting to explore this problem found a powerful source of metaphor in the discipline of alchemy. Rapidly falling into discredit, yet with the physical science of chemistry still far off, early seventeenth-century alchemy ended up in the strange position of appearing to be both true and false at the same time. For poets like Shakespeare, Donne, and Herbert, alchemy became a model for other fields of knowledge that continued to flourish despite their well-known limitations. Alchemy suffered a loss of credibility because it was primarily a text-based discipline that gave more weight to the authority of ancient writings than to practice. To borrow Henry Turner’s terms, alchemy and other pre-scientific disciplines were casualties of a growing distinction between “poesy” and “practical thinking,” the belief that
poetic inspiration deals with a different kind of knowledge than measurement and experiment do.\textsuperscript{18}

Mary Thomas Crane brings these epistemological issues back to Spenser by arguing that there’s a direct connection between the collapse of Aristotelian science and Spenser’s allegorical method in \textit{The Faerie Queene}. Crane sees the difficulty and ambiguity of Spenserian allegory as an expression of a more general anxiety that nature was becoming illegible. As the non-empirical techniques of natural philosophy began to be challenged by figures like Copernicus and Paracelsus, there was a sense that human beings were losing their “intuitive relation” with the world.\textsuperscript{19} Crane argues that Spenser was simultaneously intrigued and terrified by the emergence of these new empirical methods. Measurement threatened to destabilize long-held beliefs, but it also had the potential to answer important questions about nature. As her reading of Book 5 and the Mutabilitie Cantos illustrates, \textit{The Faerie Queene} alternately questions and defends the legibility of the universe. “Spenser chose to write an allegorical poem,” says Crane, “in part because it provided a way to explore the most pressing epistemological questions of his time, and the emotional energy of \textit{The Faerie Queene} is largely generated by his obsessive need to stage and restage scenes where the observed surface of the world has a complex relationship with some underlying and hidden truth.”\textsuperscript{20}

Crane highlights an important aspect of Spenser’s engagement with epistemology: when it comes to knowledge, his poetry is as much an expression of gain as of loss. On the one hand, the surface of Spenser’s allegory can be frustratingly opaque. As Spenser himself put it to Raleigh, the lessons of \textit{The Faerie Queene} are “clowdily enwrapped.”\textsuperscript{21} The reader searching in vain for meaning beneath the poem’s surface is analogous to the natural philosopher whose techniques can no longer access the truths beneath the surface. On the other hand, as Paul Alpers insists, “In reading \textit{The Faerie Queene}, one apprehends the depths only by staying on the surface.”\textsuperscript{22} For Alpers, the only coherence the poem has is the individual reader’s experience of its poetic cloudiness. Its successive episodes develop what he calls “a psychological experience within the reader,” rather than just a series of events to be observed.\textsuperscript{23} Despite their methodological differences, Crane and Alpers’ arguments are remarkably complementary. Spenser’s attempt to reproduce the loss of legibility in the natural world ends up giving his poem a much more sophisticated kind of legibility. Without a predetermined meaning beneath its surface, \textit{The Faerie Queene} can be re-determined by each new reader’s experience of its
interpretive challenges. Crane is right that Spenser’s poetry depicts a lost intuitive connection with nature. But the corollary of losing touch with nature is the creation of a new relationship between poem and reader, between the work of art and the person who sees it.

Another way to characterize the view of Spenser that emerges from pairing Crane and Alpers is to use the vocabulary of Jacques Rancière’s aesthetics. The poetic experience that Spenser offers as a consequence of the loss of legibility in nature is a lot like Rancière’s understanding of “autonomy.” Autonomous works of art don’t just reproduce the social world in which they were created. They also present their observers with an alternative “form of life,” a sense of how their existences could be different. These works perform a kind of ideological critique by showing, directly or indirectly, that the way things are isn’t necessarily the way they have to be. Drawing on Schiller’s notion that the experience of beauty bridges the gap between art and everyday life, Rancière argues that an “effective” aesthetic experience is an experience of the “and” between art and life. The effect of this “and” is to ground the autonomy of art by connecting it to “the hope of ‘changing life.’” The Faerie Queene is an autonomous work in the sense that it can’t be reduced to the moral or political orthodoxy it often appears to espouse. The allegory might, at times, seem to be trying to regulate the number of ways in which it can be read. But it never allows for definitive interpretations. The poem continually defers the act of explaining itself, and that deferral lets Spenser keep its meanings perpetually in play. Even when Faery Land seems to be allegorizing the real world of sixteenth-century England, we have to remember that the poem, as Alpers emphasizes, is not a world of its own. It has no consistent logic, and no coherence other than the sum of the reader’s reactions. Its “effectiveness,” in Rancière’s sense of being able to effect change, comes from the fact that its meanings unfold entirely within the reader. The reader of The Faerie Queene becomes the “and” that links the poem to the world of actual experience.

When Crane says that the allegory of The Faerie Queene parallels a breakdown in the ability of human knowledge to uncover the truth of nature, she provides a historical explanation for Alpers’ observation that the poem is all surface. Alpers’ reading, however, shows us what Spenser gained artistically from the epistemological changes occurring in his culture: a greater ability to create aesthetic experiences. It’s true that Spenser dwells obsessively on the negative effects of losing touch with nature. At the same time though, that loss lets Spenser hint at other possibilities for knowledge. In many of Spenser’s poems, we’re presented with figures who
make interpretive errors because they believe that the natural world holds the truth about human life. The most seriously compromised are those who themselves embody an overlap between nature and culture: talking beasts, human-animal hybrids, and, of course, Satyrane. When these figures fail, their failures become complaints about the state of knowledge, poems that show that there’s something wrong with the assumptions their characters make about the relationship between the human and the nonhuman. These complaints are also powerful examples of aesthetic experience. By using poetry to show that there is, in fact, something wrong with the way that human beings read the world around them, Spenser asks his readers to consider the possibility that their assumptions about knowledge need to change. Satyrane makes mistakes, but, as we’ll see, those mistakes are also what make him a breaker of worthless idols.

3 How Shepherds See Things

Satyrane wasn’t Spenser’s first foray into complaint and satire as a means of thinking about the state of knowledge. If we want to understand Satyrane’s significance, we have to see him as part of the epistemological problems that Spenser also explored in his earlier poetry, particularly in The Shepheardes Calender and Mother Hubberds Tale. These poems can help us better understand two ideas that Spenser returns to in Book 1 of The Faerie Queene. The first is that the truth about nature and the truth about humanity are not the same. People who look for moral standards in plants, animals, or landscapes are projecting themselves onto surfaces that mean nothing and could therefore mean anything. The second idea follows as a consequence: the gap between human thought and the natural world means that poetry has to do more than simply depict the world as it is. Because complaint and satire are so focused on what’s wrong with the world, it would seem that they don’t do a very good job of meeting this poetic responsibility. From a certain perspective, they’re aesthetic failures. From another perspective though, they’re highly successful aesthetic experiences. A complaint can’t solve a problem. What it can do is make a problem newly or more fully perceptible in the life of a reader, and that in itself is an important change.

In the introductory epistle to the The Shepheardes Calender, E. K. categorizes five of the twelve poems in the collection as “Moral” eclogues “mixed with some Satyrical bitternesse”: “Februarie,” “Maye,” “Julye,” “September,” and “October.” With the exception of “October,” these poems all follow a similar pattern. First, we’re introduced to a pair of shepherds engaged in
an ethical debate. Each shepherd mocks his opponent’s position and tries to support his own by pointing to things like plants, animals, the seasons, or even the shape of the landscape. It turns out, however, that the shepherds also disagree on the meaning of nature, and they’re unable to reach a consensus. The shepherds only deepen their confusion by looking to the nonhuman world. At these moments of impasse, the satirical bitterness of the dialogues gives way to a complaint about how the failure to distinguish between different kinds of knowledge impedes the search for truth.

In “Februarie,” a debate about youth and age ends up hinging on which of the speakers has a more biased view of the seasons. Old Thenot says that Cuddie and his young friends always think that spring has come earlier than it actually has. They need to learn to bear winter and spring equally. Cuddie replies that old men can deal with the cold because “Age and winter accord full nie” (27). He dismisses Thenot’s argument by accusing the old shepherd of merely seeing himself in the season. “Foolish old man,” he says, “I scorne thy skill / That wouldest me my springing youth to spil” (51-52). But here Cuddie makes the same mistake. Even as he rejects Thenot’s reasoning, the words “springing youth” reveal that he too imagines an accord between himself and the seasons. Though they both believe that conflating nature and subjective experience is wrong, neither shepherd seems to be able to separate the two. The debate ends in a stalemate.

The “Maye” eclogue turns to a different moral issue, the question of whether priests should live in comfort or strict self-denial. Against Piers’ puritanical views, Palinode makes a case for clerical privilege by appealing to the beauties of the spring. Why should he deny himself pleasure when “all is ycladd / With pleasauen: the ground with grasse, the Wods / With greene leaves, the bushes with bloosming Buds” (6-8)? It seems like a reasonable argument, until E. K. reminds the reader that Palinode is a mouthpiece for “the Pope, and his Antichristian prelates … [who] open a wide gate to al wickednesse and insolent government” (101). As David Norbrook puts it, Palinode ends up on the wrong side of the argument because he conflates the literal and the metaphorical: he mistakes flowers and trees for sources of ethical insight.29

Like “Maye,” “Julye” is another ecclesiastical debate, in this case about whether ambition is compatible with being a good priest. Thomalin criticizes shepherds who neglect their flocks while striving for high places, while Morrell praises hilltops and their proximity to God.
Thomalin is unconvinced and insists that it’s better to remain in “humbles dales” where the footing is “fast, / the trod is not so tickle” (14). Their conversation about topography is also a conversation about priestly ethics, and because they interpret the landscape in completely different ways, the argument can’t be resolved. Thomalin may very well have the right idea about priestly ambition, but the bigger point is that his reasoning is just as flawed as Morrell’s. Both speakers are wrong to insist that hills and dales have static meanings. Instead, as the anecdote about Algrin illustrates—Algrin being a good shepherd who also lives on a hilltop—the land has a range of moral meanings that vary according to the choices made by individual shepherds.

The “Satyrical bitterness” of Spenser’s eclogues relates to questions of what shepherds should or shouldn’t do. As the limitations of the shepherds’ ethical perspectives become apparent, the eclogues gradually turn into complaints about the shepherds’ failure to recognize that the natural world has little or nothing to say about human life. But what about the beast fables that feature in each of these eclogues? As fictions, are they able to imagine solutions to the problems of the dialogues?

Rather than clarifying things, the fables simply compound the interpretive disagreement. They repeat rather than correct the shepherds’ conflation of the human and the nonhuman. In “Februarie,” the story of a rivalry between two talking plants, an old oak and a young briar, concludes with both their deaths. Nobody learns anything, and the tale does nothing to bring Thenot and Cuddie closer to compromise. In the fable of “Maye,” the dangers of confusing man and animal are exemplified by the disguise worn by a fox who tries to get a young goat to let him into the barn. He comes to door dressed “Not as a Foxe, for then he had been kend, / But all as a poor pedlar” (237-238). Although he’s wearing human clothes, the fox somehow convinces the kid that that he’s “a poore Sheepe” (266). Bewildered by this confusion of man and beast, the kid makes the fatal mistake of letting him in. In the fables and dialogues alike, interpretation fails when it can’t distinguish one kind of knowledge from another.

To return to Rancière’s vocabulary, the fables don’t help because they have no autonomy from the lives of the shepherds. Because the fables reproduce the same errors we see in the dialogues, they don’t provide an aesthetic experience that would let the shepherds imagine other ways of knowing. For us as readers, the fables work differently. By making the confusion worse, they
underline its source: the assumption that nature and culture are governed by the same basic truths. The fables are complaints that show us the limitations of the shepherds’ understanding of their world.

If the fables can reveal a problem, or at least make it easier to see, perhaps imagination offers something to human understanding that isn’t available through the observation of nature. Poetry, as Philip Sidney argues, doesn’t depend on the natural world. It creates “another nature” of its own. 32 Spenser explores this view of poetic imagination in “October,” the last of the eclogues in E. K.’s list of moral-satirical poems. “October” is unusual because it’s about the “contempt of Poetrie and pleasants wits” (23) rather than the ethical questions faced by shepherds. Yet it’s also about something more fundamental, the idea that poetry is a form of knowledge that has to distance itself from the world.

The eclogue features Cuddie as the “perfect paterne of a Poet” (170). Like most poets, Cuddie hasn’t made much money from his art. “The dapper ditties, that I wont devise,” he says, “Delighten much: what the bett for thy?” (13-14). Piers tries to comfort him with a reminder that “the prayse is better than the prise, / The glory eke much greater than the gayne” (20). The poet’s glory isn’t monetary; it’s the praise he receives for shaping the actions of his readers. That’s why epic poets are especially praiseworthy. Their tales of heroism give readers “good advice” and help them develop “trayned willes” (23-24). But how can a poet do that, Cuddie asks, when there aren’t any heroes left to write about? The advice that Piers gives in response is the most important moment in the eclogue: “Then make thee winges of thine aspiring wit, / And, whence thou camst, flye back to heaven apace” (83-84). When the wings are introduced in line 83, Piers seems to be imagining poetry as a bird, which could be a cue for yet another beast fable. In the next line, however, the wings and feathers turn out to be angelic. For a moment, poetry and nature still seem to be contiguous. Then we discover that poetry’s flight is actually spiritual. The arrangement of the verse itself illustrates the change that Piers is talking about. As we move from one line to the next, the wings transform from something natural into something supernatural.

Piers’ statement is important because it finally suggests a way around the confusion that results from blending nature and human imagination. He insists that it isn’t the poet’s job to represent nature or, more broadly, the world of experience. As Sidney would say, those things are the responsibility of the “serving sciences,” disciplines like history and natural philosophy. 33 Poetry
only becomes a science, a way to know things, when it strives for autonomy from the real world. That’s how Cuddie can avoid the epistemological failures we saw in the other moral eclogues. Where does that autonomy lead, though? Does it lead to absolute truths, or does it lead to the radical freedom that Rancière sees in aesthetic experience? In Sidney’s *Defence*, poetry’s superiority to other forms of knowledge depends on its ability to access the transcendent. Spenser isn’t quite as confident about the availability of truth. One of his characteristic techniques in *The Faerie Queene*, for example, is to promise transcendent truths and narrative resolutions and then refuse to deliver them.\(^\text{34}\) These deferrals can make the poem a frustrating read, but, as Jonathan Goldberg has argued, they’re also what make it interesting and enjoyable. Putting thing off keeps the narrative moving, and, more importantly, it ensures that the reader’s interpretive work is never finished. Even in the very last line, or in subsequent re-readings, Spenser’s epic is always an experience of “free play” in which key events and truths are forever delayed.\(^\text{35}\)

Something similar happens in “October.” Poetry, as Piers asserts, deals with a kind of knowledge that’s completely different from the knowledge of nature or history. Although Cuddie is supposed to be the “perfect paterne of a Poet,” he admits that he isn’t up to the task of making poetry what it ought to be. Only a great poet can do that: “For Colin fittes such famous flight to scanne: / He, were he not with love so ill bedight, / Would mount as high, and sing as soote as Swanne” (90). These lines reverse the change that occurred when Piers’ “wings” turned out to be angelic rather than avian. When Cuddie remembers that Colin has broken his pipe over unrequited love, the “famous flight” turns out to be that of a bird after all. We’ve briefly glimpsed another possibility, but Cuddie sinks right back into the world of nature. The transformation of poetry into a means of knowing truth is deferred before it can be explained, let alone put into practice. What does it mean to “fly back to heaven apace”? Although Piers doesn’t say, his vagueness creates room for the kind of interpretive freedom that Goldberg sees in *The Faerie Queene*. Poetry might move “apace” to the truth, or it might just take a small pace toward it without ever getting there. Both possibilities remain at the end of the eclogue. Because it’s a complaint, “October” doesn’t actually effect the separation of poetic knowledge from worldly knowledge. Instead, it creates a literary experience in which there’s more than one way to think about what poetic knowledge can do.
4 Honest Mirth

Spenser’s other major exploration of complaint and satire before *The Faerie Queene* is *Mother Hubberds Tale*, the longest poem in the *Complaints* collection of 1591. For most of its history, *Mother Hubberds Tale* has been treated as a straightforward political allegory, a text to be decoded rather than read. More recent readings have noted that the poem is actually much harder to make sense of than previous critics have been willing to admit. Richard Danson Brown, for instance, sees the *Tale*’s resistance to interpretation as a statement of Spenser’s poetic principles. In his view, Spenser is saying that it takes a difficult poem to capture the ambiguity of lived experience. After reading the fables of *The Shepheardes Calender*, however, it’s difficult to see the *Tale* as a lesson on what poems are supposed to do. *Mother Hubberds Tale* feels like an amplification of the dead-end pessimism of the *Calender*’s fables. Even more grimly, it excludes anything like the hope of artistic change that surfaces in “October.” As the title of the collection announces, the *Tale* is a complaint: an illustration of a problem, a demonstration of something that isn’t working the way it’s supposed to. *Mother Hubberds Tale* isn’t a manifesto; it’s a lesson in what not to do.

The poem begins with the speaker’s recollection of a terrible August day when he was suffering from “the common woe,” a plague that deprived him of “sense and ordinary reason” (11-14). His friends tried to comfort him with “pleasant tales” of knights and ladies, but their stories were too “hard to be believed” (25-31). He was much more interested in a story about a fox and an ape told by Mother Hubberd, an old woman of “honest mirth” (37). “[M]y sense it greatly pleased,” he says, “All were my spirite heavie and diseased” (39-40). The tale pleased the speaker’s “sense,” his judgment, which is why he’s retelling it. He’s also said, however, that being sick deprived him of his sense and reason. That means that the sense pleased by the tale is corrupt sense, a sense that can’t make sense of things. To make matters worse, the speaker admits that his version of Mother Hubberd’s story is only “So well as I her words remember may” (43). The reader will never be able to make complete sense of this poem, and it would be useless to try. There are just too many layers of corruption. While *The Faerie Queene* promises to mean something, *Mother Hubberds Tale* promises to mean nothing. Instead, as the speaker’s insistence on honesty and credibility suggests, the poem’s difficulty will be a lot like the experience of trying to figure out real life. It’s tempting to see the frame narrative as an attempt at poetic
innovation. However, *Mother Hubberds Tale* is as much a complaint as it is a fable. Seen as a complaint, a poem about something that shouldn’t be happening, the *Tale* becomes an argument against its own senselessness. Rather than promoting a closer approximation of reality, Spenser is demonstrating that it’s actually a bad thing to have too much “honest mirth” and not enough of the stuff that’s “hard to be believed.” However imaginative it might be in other ways, a work of art that merely reproduces the corruption of the real world forfeits its ability to explore alternatives.

One of the most confusing things about the poem is the inconsistent depiction of the Fox and the Ape, who become more human or more beastlike depending on the situation. In the first episode, the Ape poses as a shepherd while the Fox pretends to be his sheepdog (295). Then, in the next episode, the Fox passes himself off as a human priest (550-574). Later, the Ape goes to court dressed “like a Gentleman” with the Fox as his groom (660-677), even though the entire body politic turns out to be made up of “wyld beasts” (1129). As in the moral eclogues of *The Shepheardes Calender*, the confusing mix of man and animal in *Mother Hubberds Tale* suggests that nature and human culture need to be separate in order to be comprehensible. In light of the speaker’s emphasis on the story’s credibility and “honest mirth,” however, the scrambled opposition between man and animal also functions as an analogy for the *Tale*’s confusion of the real and the imaginary. Not that there’s anything realistic about talking animals, but the tale is much closer to the inscrutability of life than most readers would probably expect from an allegorical fable.

The *Tale*’s unsatisfying conclusion is Spenser’s most direct complaint about poetry that merely reproduces the problems of the real world. After the Ape usurps the Lion’s throne, Jove vows to “blot his brutish name / Unto the world” (1239-1241), meaning that he’ll expose him for what he really is. In another sense though, blotting the Ape’s name will obscure it, making it impossible to know the truth about him. The double sense of blot—to make known, and to make unknowable—perfectly characterizes what happens when the Lion finally passes judgment on the evil duo. The Fox “He did uncase, and then away let flie,” and the Ape gets his long ears and tail cut off. “Since which,” says the speaker, “all Apes but halfe their eares have left, / And of their tailes are utterlie bereft” (1379-1384). The whole poem turns out to be a sort of “how the leopard got its spots” story, a laughably inadequate explanation for the previous fifteen hundred lines. The Fox and the Ape are only temporarily humiliated before being set free to continue
their mischief. Moreover, clipping the Ape’s tail and long ears might actually make it easier for him to disguise himself as a man. In the end, the Tale makes even less sense than it did at the beginning.

One of the primary tasks of poetry in the early modern period is to reveal the truths that give meaning and order to life. Fictions, as Sidney and others insist, recover a lost golden world. Notwithstanding its liberties with Roman gods and animals, Mother Hubberds Tale clearly depicts a brazen world. Rather than making experience comprehensible, the poem self-consciously evades our attempts to interpret it. In the process, it recreates the mental experience of trying to make sense of a corrupt world. The Ape, in other words, isn’t the only one “bereft” of a “taile.” As readers, we’re bereft of a tale as well: a story that actually means something. What Spenser offers instead is a complaint about the relationship between poetry and knowledge, a demonstration of what happens when poetry doesn’t meet its responsibility to think beyond the world of experience. Like the Fox and the Ape, the Tale itself performs a kind of impersonation. It looks like a poem, but it doesn’t do what poems are supposed to do. Its self-consciousness about this failure, however, is what allows it to function as both a complaint and an aesthetic experience. To extend Rosamund Tuve’s famous observation about allegory, Spenserian complaint doesn’t just make readers think about what they already know, it shows them that there’s something wrong with the way they know it.

5 “Idoloclastes Satyrane”

Spenser’s eclogues and fables demonstrate that complaint and satire can produce the kind of critique that Rancière associates with art—to a point. They can help the reader think about the way things are, but they don’t offer a way to think differently about them. Spenser returns to this artistic problem in Book 1 Canto 6 of The Faerie Queene, once again in the context of an exploration of the difference between human truth and the truth of nature. At first glance, Canto 6 doesn’t seem to have much to do with satire. Other than the satyrs themselves, Spenser doesn’t draw on any of the conventions of verse satire. In early modern culture, however, there were strong imaginative links between satyrs, forests, and satire. Satyrs are humanlike without being bound by social norms. Their animal aspect seems to give them the freedom to do and say anything they want. Like a satyr, the satirist wants to be close enough to society to see people’s secrets, and also far enough away to critique them with a semblance of objectivity.
Despite these literary connections, Spenser’s satyrs are usually read as a religious or historical allegory. Richard Jordan says that the satyrs are the Jews of the Old Testament, while Anthea Hume sees them as Spenser’s idea of “a characteristic experience of the true church” by marginal or indigenous populations. It’s easy to see why this approach has been so prevalent. As Oram puts it, the satyrs are a convenient symbol for how Spenser might have imagined “human nature at its most primitive and most removed from the light of the Spirit.” Yet the satyrs’ interaction with Una also recalls the confusion and misreading that proliferates in Spenser’s complaints, and the complaints are very much about European ideas of what counts as knowledge. Moreover, as forest-dwelling demi-goats, the satyrs seem to embody the intuitive relationship with nature that informed natural philosophy for centuries. Perhaps the satyrs aren’t a representation of early man, but of early modern man. Rather than seeing them as an allegory for the flawed knowledge of ancient or non-western cultures, it might be more productive to read the satyrs as a satirical complaint about European knowledge at the end of the sixteenth century.

The circumstances that lead to Una’s encounter with the satyrs are set in motion at the end of Canto 3, when her lion is killed by Sansloy. At the start of Canto 6, Sansloy brings her to

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   a forest wilde,
   And turning wrathful fyre to lustfull heat,
   With beastly sin thought her to haue defiled,
   And made the vassall of his pleasures wilde.
   Yet first he cast by treatie, and by traynes,
   Her to persuade, that stubborne fort to yild:
   For greater conquest of hard loue he gaynes,
   That workes it to his will, then he that it constrains.
```

(1.6.3)

This stanza establishes the overlap between human and nonhuman that the rest of the canto will interrogate. The first five lines are full of words that evoke nature in an uncontrollable state: “wilde,” “fyre,” “heat,” and “beastly.” Then, after the word “Yet,” Spenser suddenly switches to the language of politics and warfare. Hoping to make his “conquest” more enjoyable, Sansloy tries through both “treatie” and treachery to persuade her to yield her “stubborne fort.” One possible reason for the shift in the second half in the stanza is that a “forest wilde” in this period is just as much a legal construct as it is a wilderness. A forest is a landscape where the natural and the social intermingle, and so Sansloy’s attack becomes a sophisticated set of negotiations
even as it remains an act of sexual predation. Spenser’s point is that fleeing to a “forest wild” in Faery Land is by no means an escape from the social world.

Hearing Una’s cry for help, a troop of satyrs comes to her rescue. “Vnto the place they come incontinent,” says the speaker, in a “rude, mishapen, monstrous rablement” (1.6.8). As “monstrous” hybrids of man and animal, the satyrs and their “barbarous truth” symbolize a view of nature quite similar to what Spenser explored in his earlier poetry. In *The Shepheardes Calender*, Spenser’s shepherds have a bad habit of seeing links between themselves and the nonhuman world. By mixing two different kinds of knowledge, they thwart their own attempts to learn the truth about how shepherds should behave. The satyrs are another version of this epistemological mistake. Even though they save Una, truth isn’t what initially attracts them. Instead, it’s “the far rebownded noyce” of Una’s cries (1.6.8), the distant echo of truth reverberating through the trees.

When the satyrs finally see Una, they prostrate themselves before her and “worship her, as Queene, with oliue girond crownd” (1.6.13). Although they recognize that she’s important, their veneration quickly goes too far. The satyrs confuse Una with the spiritual truth she represents and turn her into “th’Image of Idolatryes” (1.6.19). Her attempt to stop them only makes things worse: “when their bootlesse zeal she did restrayne, / From her own worship, they her Asse would worship fayn” (1.6.19). For the satyrs, there’s no difference between human and nonhuman, spiritual and temporal, knowledge and idolatry. The essence of their mistake is that, having seen Una, they find “henceforth nothing faire, but h er on earth” (1.6.18). The satyrs’ love becomes idolatry because it’s a love for Una “on earth,” not for what she can teach them about a higher world.

The satyrs make the same mistake as the shepherds in Spenser’s moral eclogues. The difference is that this scene is more satiric than anything in the *Calender*. The satyrs don’t just misinterpret the truth; they make themselves ridiculous in the process. They aren’t qualified to be caretakers of the truth, and their bootless zeal prepares the way for Satyrane:

It fortuned a noble warlike knight
By just occasion to that forrest came,
To seeke his kindred, and the lignage right,
From whence he tooke his weldeserued name.

(1.6.20)
This is the version of Satyrane that Coleridge admired. He’s “Plaine, faithful, true, and enimy of shame,” fights for ladies’ honour, and takes no pleasure in “vaine glorious frayes” (1.6.20). His “weldeserued name,” however, comes not from his heroic deeds, but from his “lignage.” We soon learn that Satyrane is the son of a human woman who was raped by a satyr. The circumstances are uncomfortably close to Una’s first encounter with the savage nation. Although his chivalric heroism puts him a step above the satyrs, he’s still a mixture of nature and civilization. There’s also another reason that Satyrane deserves his name. Like the satyrs, he’ll turn out to be both satirist and satirized.

The narrator says that Satyrane was “nursed up in life and manners Wilde, / Emongst wild beasts and woods, from lawes of men exiled” (1.6.23). Then we learn that he actually spent his childhood dominating everything in the forest. He wrestles with lions, rips bear cubs away from their mothers, and tames wild bulls. His satyr father is unnerved by this behaviour, which only intensifies as Satyrane gets older:

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for to make his powre approued more,
Wyld beastes in yron yokes he would compell;

And them constraine in equall teme to draw.
Such ioy he had, their subborn harts to quell,
And sturdie courage tame with dreadfull aw
That his beheast they feared, as a tyrans law.
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(1.6.26)

The power Satyrane exerts over animals has a political dimension. Under his rule, the beasts are organized into an “equall teme.” Satyrane is an exile from the law, and he’s also a tyrant handing down edicts. The point of the backstory is to show that Satyrane is not quite human. His desire to control nature proceeds from the fact that he’ll always have one hoof, so to speak, in the animal world. As Harry Berger puts it, the canto’s shift in attention from the satyrs to Satyrane articulates the evolution of “chivalric man, through repression and sublimation.” It’s important to recognize, however, that Satyrane is only one more step towards modern, rational man. Like the satyrs, he’s a stage in a process and not its end result.

Satyrane’s heritage also links him with satire. He’s a lover of truth, and his obsession with taming animals is analogous to the kind of instinctual repression and self-mastery that satire tends to promote. But in what sense is Satyrane the idol-smashing satirist that Coleridge
The limitations of satire become even more apparent in Satyrane’s battle with Sansloy at the end of the canto. As the two clash over Una, the narrator describes how their weapons make

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{… wide furrowes in their fresh fraile,} \\
\text{That it would pity any living eie.} \\
\text{Large floods of bloud adowne their sides did raile;} \\
\text{But floods of bloud cold not them satisfie;} \\
\text{Both hungred after death: both chose to win, or die.}
\end{align*}
\]

(1.6.43)

The stanza doesn’t distinguish between Satyrane and Sansloy. It’s as though they mirror one another, a point that Spenser emphasizes by splitting the final line into two rhythmically identical phrases that begin with the same word (“both”). As we’ve seen, Sansloy embraces his bestial impulses while Satyrane strives to tame them. Insofar as Satyrane is a figure of satire, Sansloy would seem to be his tailor-made adversary. So why do they end up the same?

Part of the answer lies in Spenser’s use of the word “raile.” In stanza 43, it describes the blood flowing from the combatants’ wounds. Railing, of course, is also the term for what satirists do when they attack a vice. Here though, “raile” applies to the wounds suffered by both attacker and
opponent. Despite Satyrane’s connection to satire, railing isn’t what makes him different from Sansloy. It’s what makes him the same. Just as the railing of blood renders him indistinguishable from his adversary, the railing of the satirist is little more than a recapitulation of the flawed world he attacks. The implication is that Satyrane can’t be Una’s guardian because worldly truth is the only truth he’s capable of understanding.

And yet he’s still very much an iconoclast. Satyrane disrupted the satyrs’ attempt to make Una into an idol, and here he’s exposing another figure of false knowledge: himself. His failure as a satirist is also the failure of a model of knowledge that tries to champion truth by grappling with the world of experience rather than turning to poetic imagination. The scene ends up being a characteristic moment of Spenserian complaint, a poetic illustration of an epistemological problem. And, true to the complaint tradition, the scene resolves nothing. As I argued earlier, one of the distinguishing features of complaint is that it defers to someone or something else as the agent of change. By leaving things unresolved, Spenser implies that the result of the battle, and hopefully its meaning, will be revealed later in the poem. This kind of deferral isn’t just characteristic of complaints. It’s also how The Faerie Queene itself works, as Goldberg has noted. Like many other moments of deferred resolution in The Faerie Queene, the end of Canto 6 defers to the poem itself as the power that will answer the questions it has raised. We don’t have to wait long, because the very next canto offers a corrective for satire’s inability to hold onto the truth. When Arthur becomes Una’s guardian at the beginning of Canto 7, satire is superseded by the imaginative power of art.

Arthur’s appearance in Canto 7 is also his first appearance in the poem, and the very first thing we learn about him is that his armour is an artistic marvel. The speaker says that “His glitterand armour shined farre away / Like glauncing light of Phoebus brightest ray” (7.29). Because Phoebus Apollo is the god of poetry and knowledge as well as the god of the sun, his “brightest ray” glances at intellectual as well as literal illumination. Arthur’s armour shines like sunlight, and it’s also an aesthetic experience in which knowledge is conveyed through beauty. His helmet in particular shows that he’s associated with a different kind of knowledge than Una’s previous guardians:

His haughtie helmet, horrid all with gold
Both glorious brightnesse, and great terroure bred;
For all the crest a Dragon did enfold
With greedie pawes, and ouer all did spread  
His golden wings[.]  

(1.7.31)

The fear and horror mixed into this description suggests that the speaker is indirectly voicing some of Una’s feelings about the helmet. With its greedy paws and flaming mouth, the dragon is an obvious reminder of the dragon terrorizing her kingdom, a dragon that only Redcrosse can kill. But Spenser also emphasizes that the image breeds “glorious brightness” as much as “great terrour.” The dragon is glorious because it’s also the emblem of Arthur, who will soon save Redcrosse from Orgoglio’s dungeon and return him to his quest. The helmet does two things: it depicts what’s wrong with the world, and it prefigures how the world will be redeemed. Even though the dragon reminds Una of something that’s actually happening, its meaning isn’t limited by her experiences. As a work of art, the dragon has a degree of aesthetic autonomy. Its “golden wings” gesture at a future victory for holiness that, at this point in the narrative, is still difficult to imagine.

When Una runs away from Satyrane at the end of Canto 6, Spenser leaves human knowledge in a depressing state. Una’s adventure in the forest implies that any approach to knowledge that confuses the way things are with the way they could or should be is a kind of idolatry. The satyrs’ barbarous truth confuses the human the nonhuman, and, as a result, they fumble truth even when it’s right in front of them. To them, Una’s donkey is just as profound as her spiritual teachings. As a knight, Satyrane has more distance from nature than the satyrs. Like a satirist, however, he’s too close to the flawed world of experience. Although he tries valiantly to kill one bad guy, he can’t, like the dragon on Arthur’s helmet, offer a way of imagining how all the bad guys might finally be defeated. As Una’s final guardian before Arthur, however, Satyrane is the most important step in Spenser’s account of what stands between human thought and the truth. Without Satyrane, we wouldn’t be able to see the question that Arthur’s armour answers. Obviously, not every reader will anticipate that Spenser is heading towards an argument about art as a distinct form of knowledge. But any reader can see that Canto 6 ends without resolving the problems it has introduced. That’s ultimately why Satyrane is important. His railing, his mingling of things that should be kept separate, demonstrates that something has to change.

This “mingling” also seems to be what made Satyrane an intriguing alter ego for Coleridge. His preface to the travel letters presents Satyrane as a blend of opposing attitudes and emotional
states. More than just mixing blame and praise, however, Coleridge saw Satyrane as an intersection between literature and the way people understand the world around them. His familiarity with the “Parnassian forest” was inseparable from his quest to topple “worthless Idols,” outmoded notions of truth. Yet Satyrane wasn’t looking for the future of knowledge. He simply reaffirmed “ancient truths” that still had value. Maybe that’s why Coleridge claims that his friend Satyrane is dead. When he attributes his own letters to a deceased friend, Coleridge shows that he’s doing something different than when he writes under his own name as a poet and critic. Like satire, Satyrane’s travel letters aren’t without their poetic moments, but they’re first and foremost descriptions of experience. The rest is left to the imagination.

2 Ibid., 184, lines 2-5.
3 Ibid., lines 21-23.
4 Ibid., lines 6-12.
7 John Peter, Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 3.
8 Ibid., 53.
9 “Spenser again, whatever his interest in another context, is hardly a key-figure in the development of Satire. His allegorical method is distinctly medieval, recalling the old fable of the wolf, the fox, and the ass, or the old quarrel between the griffin and the pelican in The Plowman’s Complaint, but its affinities are with political songs rather than complaints proper. The Tale is more easily related to the allegorical method used elsewhere in his own poems than to any trend or tradition that we examine here.” Ibid., 133.
12 Ibid., 11-12.
13 Ibid., 103-104. Most of the time Latour uses the term “premodern” to refer to nonwestern traditional societies, cultures that form the object of study for the kind of anthropology that Latour wants to apply to the modern world. But, as the prefix suggests, premodern also describes the way Europeans understood the world from the Middle Ages to the mid-seventeenth century.

Ibid., 18.

Ibid., 19-20.


Ibid., 112.

Spenser, “A Letter of the Authors,” in Roche, 16.


Ibid., 14.


Ibid., 116.


Ibid., 20-26.


Cullen sees the relationship between the fables and the dialogues as parodic rather than corrective. See Cullen, 39.


Sidney, 91.


Ibid., 24-26.

Although *Mother Hubberds Tale* was published the year after *The Faerie Queene*, there are allusions in the poem that suggest it may have been written in the early 1580s and then revised closer to publication. See Oram’s introduction in *The Yale Edition*.

In readings that depend on history and biography to explain the poem, the Fox is usually understood to be William Cecil, Lord Burghley. Thomas Herron has suggested that the Fox could also be caricature of Adam Loftus, Archbishop of Dublin. See Thomas Herron, “Reforming the Fox: Spenser’s ‘Mother Hubberds Tale,’ the Beast Fables of Barnabe Riche, and Adam Loftus, Archbishop of Dublin,” *Studies in Philology* 105 (2008): 336-387. For the
standard account of the Fox as Burghley, see Edwin Greenlaw, *Studies in Spenser's Historical Allegory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1932), 119.


39 See the *OED Online*, s. v. “sense, n.,” especially definitions 1 (perception) and 2 (judgment).


41 As the tale unfolds, the Fox especially moves along, in Lauren Silberman’s words, a “continuum from naturalistic to anthropomorphic … from the pole of ‘mouse’ to the pole of ‘Mickey,’ if you will.” Lauren Silberman, “Aesopian Prosopopoia: Making Faces and Playing Chicken in *Mother Hubberds Tale*,” *Spenser Studies* 27 (2012), 228.

42 *OED Online*, s. v. “blot, v.,” definitions 2, 3, and 4. The word *blot* has a range of meanings that make this an important moment. As a verb, it means, “to slander”; it also means, “to write”; and it also means, “to obscure.” All three meanings were available to Spenser.

43 William Oram characterizes the judgment in even stronger terms. “The companions are not stopped,” he observes. “They possess a demonic energy which may enable them to continue in their metamorphic career long after the poem has ended” (Oram, 332).

44 Quoted in Alpers, 330.


49 To my ear, each half of stanza 43’s final line consists of a spondee (stressed, stressed) followed by two iambics (unstressed, stressed).
Chapter 4
Satire and the Aesthetic in As You Like It

1 New Art and New Life

As You Like It is a play in search of a future. At the same time, it is also a deeply nostalgic play. Some critics have celebrated what they see as its striving for ideological balance and resistance to social change.¹ Recent readings have tended to be more progressive, seeing the play as a response to unjust laws, a critique of gender and sexuality, or as an exploration of humanity’s relationship with the environment.² One constant in the scholarship is the recognition that As You Like It is a play for people who want their world to be different: to change, or at least change back. Another way to put it is that the play attracts readers who are disposed to satire. Like Jaques, they want to “cleanse the foul body of th’infected world” (2.7.60), even if they disagree on the nature of the disease. Satire, of course, has a politically mixed heritage as well. As Alvin Kernan observes, the satirist is often a conservative and a revolutionary at the very same time. “Paradox,” he says, “seems to be his natural inheritance.”³ Strangely though, Shakespeare’s use of satire in As You Like It has not received much attention. This is unfortunate, since paying attention to satire is vital to understanding why As You Like It has appealed to conservative and progressive readers alike. It is also essential, as I will try to show in this essay, to understanding the broader argument that Shakespeare is making about art and its ability to change the world.

The starting point for most satire is some sort of social degradation, which is exactly what Shakespeare depicts in the opening scenes of As You Like It. Frederick, the new duke, has usurped and exiled his older brother Ferdinand. Meanwhile, the death of Sir Rowland de Boys has allowed Oliver, the oldest of Sir Rowland’s sons, to enslave his own brother. Directly or indirectly, the satiric speeches of Jaques and Rosalind are focused almost entirely on the implications of these events. The world depicted in act one, says Jay Halio, is one “based on expediency and the lust for power … not a brave new world, but a degenerate new one. With no obligation to tradition—to the past—it is ruthless in its self-assertion.”⁴ Is there a way to restore some kind of shared truth to a society that has collapsed into competing self-interested truths? As it turns out, satire cannot do much more than reiterate this question. In a sense then, it fails. On the other hand though, by showing what it cannot do, satire also succeeds in a very important way. It points to a different kind of truth, the conditional truth of art. For Shakespeare, the
conditionality of art means that fictions, in particular poetry and drama, can reimagine the world and alter it in perceptible ways. Concentrating on the satiric aspects of *As You Like It*, in other words, can give us a better understanding of the play’s exploration of the aesthetic as a force for social change.

The word *aesthetic* can mean many things. In this essay, I use it as a synonym for *art* or, more specifically, *fictions*. Although I use these other words as well, neither of them quite captures the transformative potential of art that I believe is central to understanding *As You Like It*. I prefer the term *aesthetic* because it suggests the change that might follow when a work of art makes some aspect of life newly perceptible. This is especially true of how Immanuel Kant and, more recently, Jacques Rancière have used the word. Before turning to Shakespeare, I want to glance at Kant and Rancière’s work on aesthetics because they see the same potential in art that Shakespeare sees. Art can link individuals together and it can expand our understanding of the world it depicts. By doing so, it creates an opportunity for the world to be different.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant identifies something strange about the way we think about beauty in art. We judge beauty subjectively, and yet we act as though our subjective judgments are objectively true. “A judgment of taste requires everyone to assent,” he says, “and whoever declares something to be beautiful holds that everyone ought to give his approval to the object at hand and that he too should declare it beautiful.”

Kant thinks this is possible because, to some degree, everyone has “common sense.” For example, when I say a poem is beautiful, I offer my judgment as a correct application of the common sense available to everyone. If you have any common sense at all, you will agree. But just because you ought to like the poem does not mean that you will. I could be wrong. This means that judgments of artistic beauty are always conditional. They contain an implied if-clause that reminds subjects of their links to one another. (“If I’m right, you’ll agree this poem is beautiful.”) This conditionality lets an aesthetic judgment tap into the common sense we (hopefully) all share. As Kant sees it, this makes art a fundamentally social and socializing experience.

More than that, Kant thinks that art can actually alter our understanding through what he calls an “aesthetic idea.” An aesthetic idea is an artistic representation of a concept that “provokes much thought” and introduces so many “kindred presentations” that it manages to expand the concept itself. “In a word,” Kant says, “an aesthetic idea is a presentation of the imagination which is
conjoined with a given concept and is connected, when we use the imagination in its freedom, with such a multiplicity of partial presentations that no expression that stands for a determinate concept can be found for it.” An aesthetic idea is a special kind of fiction that allows the reader or viewer to discover new ideas and connections between things. These connections give aesthetic ideas an ineffable quality. Works of art that contain aesthetic ideas do more than just represent things. They alter or broaden our understanding of what is being depicted in new and surprising ways.

Kant’s priority is to analyze aesthetic judgment free of ends and interests. He is more interested in what art is than what it can do. Recent work on aesthetics by Jacques Rancière, however, directly addresses the social implications of art that Kant ignores. Rancière defines the aesthetic as a “specific sensory experience that holds the promise of both a new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community.” For Rancière, the aesthetic is one of several different “regimes” of art, particular ways that artists have depicted their assumptions about how the world is organized. In the Renaissance, the dominant regime was the “poetic” or “representative” regime, which had strict rules and hierarchies for depicting reality. In the nineteenth century, this regime was subsumed by the “aesthetic” regime, which demolished old hierarchies and saw everyday objects and experiences as worthy of artistic representation. Importantly though, the aesthetic regime is not a period in the history of art. Rancière sees elements of it in both Flaubert and Cervantes, for example. The aesthetic regime is instead a reimaging of art’s mode of being through a radical equality of style and subject matter. It allows anything and everything to become art. The result is a blurring of the boundaries between different forms of art and also between art and other kinds of human activity:

The aesthetic regime of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres. Yet it does so by destroying that mimetic barrier that distinguished ways of doing and making, a barrier that separated its rules from the order of social occupations. The aesthetic regime asserts the singularity of art and at the same time destroys the pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. It simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself.
When art gets mixed up with the other things that people do, it becomes another way in which they can change the material conditions of their lives. The aesthetic is the name Rancière gives to the conjoined promise of new art and new forms of social existence. In the aesthetic regime, art makes social change possible by making it “thinkable,” by using fictions to show that the way things are is not necessarily the way they have to be.¹⁴

Kant and Rancière help us to understand two very important things about aesthetic objects. First, they reveal the connections between individuals. Second, they expand our understanding of the things they depict, which often involves imagining how those things might be different. The aesthetic can make a different society possible by making it perceptible through fictions. Shakespeare agrees. The basic problem he lays out in the first act of As You Like It is that there seems to be an impasse between those who are nostalgic for an ideal past and those who embrace the cynicism of the present. A situation like that is fertile ground for a satirist. Unfortunately, the play’s two main satirists, Jaques and later Rosalind, are not able to solve their society’s problems. Their railing, however, makes a solution imaginable. Rosalind realizes that art has a social power that depends not on objective or subjective standards of truth, but on conditional truth, the truth of if. Rosalind’s if, her use of fictions, brings the characters together and imagines how their conflicts might be resolved. At the end of the play, the conditionality of the aesthetic suggests that a different future is possible for Duke Senior and his followers—possible, but not actual, because art’s power for change is fundamentally uncertain.

2 There Begins My Sadness

As You Like It begins with a conflict between what is and what was. Or so the characters think. Actually though, the parallel scenes in the de Boys’ orchard and Duke Frederick’s court show that the real problem is the idea that it is possible to separate past and present at all. This unstable opposition takes a number of different forms in the play. In the opening scenes, Shakespeare explores it in two main ways: the relationship between blood and law in determining status, and the relationship between Nature and Fortune in determining a person’s fate. In each binary, the former term is part of a nostalgic past, while the latter term seems to dominate the unhappy present. And in both cases, the aesthetic shows that such distinctions are untenable. The acts that follow try to find a way to use the aesthetic to make a practical intervention into the basic problem of act one: the mistaken belief that the past and present are disconnected.
A few years before the start of the play, a gentleman named Sir Rowland de Boys dies and leaves his estate to his oldest son, Oliver. He instructs Oliver to look after the two younger sons, Jaques and Orlando. While Jaques is sent away to school, Orlando is kept “rustically” (1.1.7) at home, housed like an animal, and forced to eat with the servants. In the play’s first lines, Orlando summarizes his backstory to Adam, the family’s oldest servant: “As I remember, Adam, it was upon this fashion bequeathed me by will but poor a thousand crowns, and, as thou sayst, charged my brother on his blessing to breed me well; and there begins my sadness” (1.1.1-4). Orlando says that his misfortune started when his father divided his last wishes: part became the text of the will, and part became a verbal charge witnessed by old Adam. “As” Orlando remembers, he looks back to a past cut off from his current life by his father’s death and Oliver’s failure to breed him well. He hopes to recover and redeem this past, to put the will and the charge back together. This hope is what makes Orlando the author, or at least co-author, of his own misfortune. When he says, “there begins my sadness,” the word “there” points in one sense to Sir Rowland’s death and the ignored charge. In another sense, it points to the first sentence Orlando speaks (“As I remember …”). His sadness has no single origin. It begins there, both as he remembers and every time he remembers. As the rest of the scene demonstrates, Orlando’s sadness is still beginning because he is still trying to recover a past that he believes is completely lost.

After Oliver enters, the two brothers get into a bitter disagreement that quickly escalates into violence. At first, they seem to be clashing over their different understandings of status. Orlando, as a lover of the past, thinks that blood matters more than the legal conventions of birth order. Oliver, by contrast, only cares about the letter of the law. As they explain their views though, it becomes clear that their dispute actually results from something they agree on: the notion that the past and present are different. “I know you are my eldest brother,” Orlando tells Oliver, explaining his defiance,

\[
\text{and in the gentle condition of blood you should so know me. The courtesy of nations allows you my better in that you are the first-born, but the same tradition takes not my blood away, were there twenty brothers betwixt us. I have as much of my father in me as you, albeit I confess your coming before me is nearer to his reverence.}
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(1.1.41-48)

Orlando thinks there are two distinct kinds of status. On the one hand, there is “the courtesy of nations,” the rules of conduct among the elite that maintain the power of the oldest son. These
conventions, he asserts, do not detract from the older and more important “gentle condition of blood” that supports them. Blood can be divided equally between any number of sons. Oliver is therefore only his better because he is “nearer” to Sir Rowland’s “reverence.” Being better in this case is relative rather than absolute. And yet, Orlando has already admitted that Oliver “mines,” or undermines, “my gentility with my education” (1.1.19-20). He knows his blood is being taken away even as he denies the possibility. The reason he feels compelled to defend his share of his father’s spirit is that it is legitimately in danger. Orlando himself does not seem to grasp that what he thinks and what he says are not the same. Despite his claim that gentle blood is immune to circumstance, it is precisely because the contingent can threaten the absolute that he has to resist Oliver.

As the scene continues, it becomes even more apparent that even though Orlando and Oliver have different ideas about how blood and convention bestow status, neither of them can stabilize that difference. Take, for instance, the short soliloquy where Oliver explains his hatred for Orlando: “he’s gentle, never schooled and yet learned, full of noble device, of all sorts enchantingly beloved, and indeed so much in the heart of the world, and especially of my own people, who best know him, that I am altogether misprized” (1.1.154-160). The term “noble device” has a double sense here. It refers to personal intelligence, and also to a family coat of arms. The ambiguity means that Oliver actually agrees with Orlando’s argument about blood trumping courtesy. Though he tries to deny it, he sees an identity between his brother’s natural body and the abstract sign of his gentility. Then Oliver changes his mind back again. Imagining his own status as a price fluctuating in a market, he claims that he is “misprized” rather than simply disliked by his people. Despite what they claim to believe, both brothers appear to see gentility as simultaneously absolute and relative. The problem is not that they disagree; it is their attempt to maintain a distinction so unstable that it collapses as soon as it is articulated.

Orlando speaks truer than he knows when he rebukes Oliver with the accusation “Thou hast railed on thyself” (1.1.58). The brothers’ own words satirically deconstruct their beliefs. To put it another way, Orlando and Oliver unwittingly speak in a way that both Kant and Rancière would call aesthetic. The poetic aspects of their words—their metaphors and multiple meanings—gesture at a notion of status that they themselves are not able to see. As in a work of art, their own thoughts become, in a sense, foreign to them. In Rancière’s terms, their words are inhabited by a “heterogeneous power” that speaks a truth they are not aware of. When Orlando calls
Oliver a railler, he comes very close to recognizing the power of the aesthetic to expand and change understanding. Figuring Oliver as a satirist, he momentarily sees the situation in literary terms. Thinking with poetry lets him articulate in a single line the whole problem of the scene, even though he does not really understand it. He and his brother are unable to see that their clinging to simplistic binaries means that they have been railing on themselves for a long time.

In the court scene that follows, the fight between Orlando and Oliver is repeated, with a difference, as a debate about the relative powers of Nature and Fortune. Celia, the daughter of the usurping Duke Frederick, is trying to cheer up her cousin Rosalind, the daughter of the banished Duke Senior. Rosalind says that falling in love might be a fun distraction. Celia proposes satire instead. “Let us sit and mock the good housewife Fortune from her wheel,” she says, “that her gifts may henceforth be bestowed equally” (1.2.31-33). Turning Dame Fortune into a common housewife is just the first of the many inversions that proliferate in Rosalind and Celia’s rhetorically flashy conversation. Rosalind begins the verbal display by accusing blind Fortune of making serious mistakes in her gifts to women. Celia agrees:

CELIA. 'Tis true, for those that she makes fair she scarce makes honest, and those that she makes honest she makes very ill-favouredly.

ROSALIND. Nay, now thou goest from Fortune’s office to Nature’s; Fortune reigns in gifts of the world not in the lineaments of Nature.

Enter TOUCHSTONE.

CELIA. No? When Nature hath made a fair creature may she not by Fortune fall into the fire? Though Nature hath given us wit to flout at Fortune, hath not Fortune sent in this fool to cut off the argument?

ROSALIND. Indeed there is Fortune too hard for Nature, when Fortune makes Nature’s natural the cutter-off of Nature’s wit.

(1.2.35-49)

The exchange is very hard to follow, especially in performance. Although the syntactical parallelism creates neat contrasts, the cousins switch back and forth between the effects of Nature and Fortune so quickly that the terms cease to form a clear binary at all. The point is that Nature and Fortune are not quite the same and not quite distinguishable. The thing that really deserves to be mocked is the distinction between them. The cousins directly question the difference between Nature and Fortune, absolute and contingent, or, more generally, what was and what is. And they do it like poets, using metaphor, personification, and wordplay. Celia and Rosalind are a lot smarter than Oliver and Orlando. We get the sense that they know what they
are saying. The essential thing is that the imaginative power of poetry is what allows them to say it.

For Rosalind and Celia, satire is not simply a fun distraction. It is also a way to know, through art, why things are going so badly in the dukedom. When he banished his older brother, Duke Frederick implied that only Fortune, circumstance, and self-interest matter. His daughter and niece poetically demolish this position. Orlando and Oliver’s grasp of their situation is not as sophisticated. Still, when Orlando thinks about railing and satire, he comes close to knowing the truth about his conflict with Oliver. In many ways, the self-railing of the de Boys brothers and the conscious mockery of Rosalind and Celia point to similar conclusions. Sir Rowland’s spoken charge and written will, the gentle condition of blood and the courtesy of nations, and even Nature and Fortune, are all ways of talking about the problems that result from believing, as Celia later puts it, that “‘Was’ is not ‘is’” (3.4.27). Importantly, these are not merely intellectual problems. Both at court and in the orchard, they have major social, economic, and political consequences. If things are to change, a corrective must be found, a form of truth that everyone can believe in, and that is not just an attempt to bring back the good old days. We have already seen the seeds of this solution. Shakespeare’s alternative truth will turn out to be the conditional truth of art. So far though, we have only seen how the aesthetic might make change thinkable. If we want to understand its full transformative promise and the role that satire in particular plays in such transformations, we have to do as Shakespeare’s characters do—take a detour through the forest.

3 Let the Forest Judge

Not all early modern satirists live in the woods. But a remarkable number of the period’s literary forests have a resident satirist, a speaker who uses his rural vantage point to critique and attack the vices of his society. Though it might seem surprising that such a characteristically urban form of literature has any connection to forests at all, in fact the periphery has always been important in satire. In the medieval complaint tradition, peasant speakers like Piers Plowman know the truth about England’s political and religious institutions mainly because they are so far away from them. Roman satire too features speakers who feel compelled to escape to the country. As in the case of Juvenal’s Umbricius, leaving only intensifies their obsession with recounting the evils of urban life. In the sixteenth century, however, grounding a satire in wholesome woods
and fields was more than just a convention. For early modern writers, nature was deeply
involved in satire’s claim to be disinterested, to be able to speak foris, the Latin word for
“outside” that is also the origin of the English word forest. In this section I want to explore the
link between forests and satirists in the early modern imagination. As I will try to show, it was a
connection that Shakespeare and his contemporaries used as way to think through the
relationship between poetry and knowledge.

What exactly did the word forest mean in the sixteenth century? According to the aptly named
John Manwood, a former justice of the New Forest and the author of A Treatise of the Laws of
the Forest (1558), a forest actually consisted of several different things: “vert, venison, particular
laws and privileges, and of certaine meete officers appointed for that purpose, to the end that the
same may the better be preserved and kept for a place of recreation and pastime meete for the
royall dignity of a Prince.” In English law, a forest was more than just a wooded area. It was
also the animals that lived there, the laws that governed it, the people like Manwood who
enforced those laws, and even the monarch herself. A forest was as much a state as it was a
wilderness. Yet because forests were an ambiguous legal frontier between feudal rights and
common law, they often served as havens for criminals and staging areas for popular revolt. As
Robert Harrison puts it, early modern forests were not exactly outside the law, but rather “the
shadow of the law,” spaces that functioned as the law’s “other self.”

The chance of even a qualified escape from the normal rule of law is perhaps one reason why
satirists are frequently associated with forests. As Jaques explains in As You Like It, satirists need
to be able to speak their minds, and the law tends to get in the way. Forests offer a way around
that problem. The satirist-forest connection also had another origin though: a spelling mistake. It
was widely believed in the sixteenth century that the word satire (or satyre, as it was usually
spelled) derived from the word satyr, an error that C. S. Lewis calls “the old blunder.” In The
Arte of English Poesy (1589), Puttenham says that satire has it origins in the satyr plays of
ancient Greece. In these plays, he relates, “disguised persons under the shape of Satyres” or
“gods of the woods” would for the moral improvement of mankind recite “verses of rebuke ...
these terrene and base gods, being conversant with man’s affairs and spyers out of all their secret
faults.” Kernan argues that most poets and critics thought that adopting the voice of a satyr was
an essential part of being a satirist. Actually, most satirists only hint at their use of a satyr-like
persona. Many, like John Donne, dispense with it altogether. Nevertheless, the idea of a speaker
emerging from the woods to tell the truth about society’s hidden flaws was widespread in the culture, and it tells us a lot about how Renaissance writers thought about satire. In particular, it tells us that for writers like Rankins, Hall, Donne, Marston, and Shakespeare, satire was a way of thinking about how the aesthetic can make the truth known. Forests and satyrs had some of the characteristics of human civilization and were also distanced from it by their involvement with nature. For many writers of satire, this distance provided access to real knowledge about the world.

Shakespeare’s Forest of Arden, then, is part of a broader tradition of poets using forests to understand satire’s claim to be able to critique society. One of the earliest examples from this tradition comes from Thomas Drant, the first English translator of Horace’s satires. Drant published his translations in a collection entitled A Medicinable Morall (1566), which he prefaced with a poem on the origin of the word satire. Drant speculates that satire might come from an Arabic word for spear, or from the “waspysh” temperament of Saturn, or from the Latin word satur, “full.” A more interesting possibility is that satirists are named after “Satyrus, the mossye, rude, / Uncivile god.” This goat-footed god lives in the woods, “Shrouded in mosse, not shrynkyin for a shower, / Deemyng of mosse as of a regall bower.” Like a satirist, Satyrus is uncivil both in the sense that he is impolite and in the sense that he stands outside the social and political order. At the same time, he sees the forest as a kind of throne room, the very center of political power. Through Satyrus, Drant imagines the satirist as simultaneously “shrouded” and “not shrykying,” hiding and not hiding from the world. The hybridity of Satyrus and of the forest itself allows him to know what is really going on with human beings. In the same way, the satirist’s partial withdrawal from fact into poetry ends up providing him with a more profound grasp of what is wrong with his society. Although satire is full of “arte,” Drant insists that “The Satyrist loves Truthe, none more then he, / An utter foe to fraude in eache degree.”

Forests also appeared in the titles of many Elizabethan and Jacobean poetry collections. Calling a collection a forest was a way of announcing the formal heterogeneity of the poems it contained. It was also a clue about their satiric nature. Ben Jonson’s The Forest (1616) is probably the most famous example. Jonson explains the title in the preface to another collection called The Underwood, which appeared in the expanded 1640 folio:
With the same leave, the ancients called that kind of body *sylva*, or [hylē], in which there were works of diverse nature and matter congested, as the multitudes call timber-trees, promiscuously growing, a wood or a forest; so am I bold to entitle these lesser poems of later growth by this of *Underwood*, out of the analogy they hold to *The Forest* in my former book, and no otherwise.28

Jonson’s aural pun on the word “leave” gestures simultaneously at permission, page, and foliage. The wordplay perfectly captures the notion that forests are places where law, power, nature, and culture insect. And while none of *The Forest*’s poems are formal satires, satire is still an important part of Jonson’s idea of a forest. In the verse letter to Sir Robert Wroth, for example, Jonson’s speaker praises Wroth for living “Along the curled woods, and painted meads,” far from the “thousands” who “flatter vice, and win / By being organs to great sin.”29 The blend of nature and artifice (“curled,” “painted”) in Wroth’s woods and fields make them seem close to London in a distant kind of way. “And though so near the city, and the court,” says the speaker, Wroth is “ta’en with neither’s vice nor sport.”30 In the same way, Wroth’s forest gives the speaker just enough imaginative distance from London to revel in depicting its vices while claiming not to be taken with them. When Jonson is thinking about forests, he is thinking about satire’s claim to a kind of objective moral knowledge.

A final example before returning to Shakespeare: in a rather strange book called *Dendrologia: Dodona’s grove, or, The vocal forest* (1640), the historian James Howell uses talking trees to analyze English politics under the Stuarts. Why trees? Because British forests have always been associated with knowledge. The druids were the island’s first scholars and “commonly did use, / On God and Natures works ’mongst Trees to muse.” The druids recorded their learning on tree bark, Howell claims, and therefore “in rind / Of Trees was learning swaddled first, I find.”31 Howell hopes to be able to make sense of the chaos of recent history by drawing on an ancient native association between trees and knowledge. “Under their bloomy shade, I Historize,” he says.32 He also warns his readers of another species of text in his vocal forest, one that moves between the leaves of poetry and history. “If Satyres here you find, think it not strange,” he says. “‘Tis proper Satyres in the woods should range.”33 Where there are forests, there are often satyrs. And where there are satyrs, there tends to be satire. Howell thinks that a forest is a model for thinking about the distance that historical knowledge requires. His allegory aestheticizes history in order to make it comprehensible in a new way. Satire is part of this project because it is preoccupied with the same questions that Howell himself is. Can literature help us understand
the political, and if so, does a change in understanding have political consequences? *The vocal\nforest* does not have the answers to these questions. But forests do give Howell a sophisticated\nway to ask them.

For Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the overlapping of the natural and the human in forests\nmade them metaphors for the way art turns to fiction in order to get at the way things really are.\nA forest in an early modern poem is art reflecting on itself—as Rancière might put it, an\naesthetic object trying to make the aesthetic itself thinkable. As I have tried to show, these\nliterary forests frequently raise questions about art’s epistemological, social, and political\npotential. In *As You Like It*, Duke Senior’s speech at the beginning of act two is the play’s first\nand most vivid exploration of these possibilities. At first, the duke seems to be making a clichéd\ndefense of nature’s authenticity against the “painted pomp” of court (2.1.1-3). Then the line\nbetween the court and the wood begins to disappear. Even as the duke “shrinks” from the winter\nwind’s “icy fang” and “churlish chiding,” he smiles gratefully. “This is no flattery. These are\ncounsellors,” he insists, “That feelingly persuade me what I am” (2.1.6-11). The superficial\nlesson is that if the duke’s companions recognize the edifying effect of nature’s “adversity,” then\n“this our life, exempt from public haunt, / Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, /\nSermons in stones, and good in everything” (2.1.15-17).34 The more interesting point is that the\ncontradictions of the forest lead Duke Senior to articulate the contradictions of his own authority.\nHe believes that he is exempt from public haunt even as resistant forms of speech and writing\ncontinue to haunt the landscape around him. Like those of the dukedom, the discourses of nature\nare pretty much beyond his control. Intentionally or not, when the duke tries to describe the\nforest he ends up disclosing the very real limits of his power. Although the duke is no satirist, he\nshows us that Arden is the perfect place to become one.

4 Mere Oblivion

Although Jaques is not the only satirist in *As You Like It*, he is the satirist most clearly informed\nby the associations I have been tracing between satire, forests, and questions of knowledge. Like\nthe classic satyr-satirist, he uses Arden to claim the objectivity he needs for his attacks on vice.\nThis distance, as I have argued, depends on the fusion of man and nature that characterizes\nforests, a fusion that often stands in for the relationship between truth and fiction in art. At first,\nJaques embraces the hybridity he sees in the forest. But something strange happens when he
starts railing. Jaques suddenly wants human beings to be clearly distinguished from everything around them. Instead of imagining himself as a satyr, he becomes a physician, an anatomist, and finally a natural philosopher. He tries to define human life by separating it from everything that it is not. Hybridity turns out to be a bad thing, a barrier to knowledge. Jaques’ binary view dismisses all forms of hybridity, especially the hybrid truth of the aesthetic. And that, it turns out, is why he fails to change things. Jaques can only describe the world. He cannot imagine how it might be different. And yet, the speech on the seven ages of man is still one of the play’s most powerful aesthetic moments. Even though it fails, its failure gestures beyond itself to other possibilities. Despite his best efforts, Jaques still manages to be a poet.

Initially, Jaques is intrigued by Arden’s synthesis of the social and natural worlds. The forest is an opportunity for freedom. And as Jaques explains to Duke Senior, freedom is a prerequisite for being an effective satirist: “I must have liberty / Withal, as large a charter as the wind / To blow on whom I please” (2.7.47-49). The enjambment of line 47 emphasizes that Jaques does not imagine his liberty as a simple trade of human subjection for natural freedom. Instead, freedom is something that Jaques will have “withal,” in addition to what he already has. He is right, because even if the duke gave Jaques his liberty, that liberty would still have its source in the duke’s authority. It would be freedom by the law, rather than freedom from the law. Jaques illustrates this point by asking the duke to grant him a charter as big as the wind itself. The image evokes both the most complex charter imaginable and no charter at all. And that is exactly the point. These lines demonstrate that Jaques’ idea of freedom does not depend on a clear distinction between the free and the bound, or between the natural and the human. Instead, he imagines the satirist’s liberty in terms of a forest, a space where disruptive forces like the chiding winds are at once annexed to the sovereign’s power and never contained by it.

Jaques resists separating the social from the natural because their interpenetration offers him a degree of real, if not total, freedom. His thinking starts to change when he tries to show what he would do with his liberty. He seems to forget the forest as an example of how hybrids can be useful. Suddenly he is determined to distinguish true from false, which he compares to the task of separating the human body from the diseases that corrupt it. In exchange for his charter, Jaques promises Duke Senior a healthy society:

    Give me leave
    To speak my mind, and I will through and through
Cleanse the foul body of th’infected world,
If they will patiently receive my medicine.

(2.7.58-61)

Following Galen, scholastic physicians tended to emphasize maintaining health over curing sickness. Jaques thinks of himself as an early modern doctor like Paracelsus, who emphasized the practical treatment of disease.\(^{36}\) Doctor Jaques’ treatment can go one of two ways: the patient can laugh at his own follies, or be fatally “anatomized” (2.7.56). This applies to everyone, from the “wise man” (2.7.56), to “the city woman” who “bears / The cost of princes on unworthy shoulders” (2.7.75-76). The goal is separation. Divide the fools from truly wise, and strip what actually belongs to princes from the shoulders of middle-class women. The instrument for this procedure is the laughter provoked by the satirist’s freedom to point out absurd lies. If the target fails to laugh, the satirist changes from a doctor into an anatomist, and his patient becomes a dissected cadaver.\(^{37}\) Neither alternative seems very effective. The city woman laughs at herself. So what? And since dissected bodies generally do not recover, what good is it to anatomize her? Jaques thinks that he can reveal people’s moral and social reality in the same way that he might reveal their physical reality, by cutting away everything they are not. All he has to do is keep slicing until he gets to the truth.

The speech on the seven ages of man is Jaques’ greatest attempt at a social intervention through satire. It is also his last, because it fails miserably. In it, Jaques takes his obsession with sifting illusion from reality even further. Like Orlando, Jaques sees self-interest as the basic cause of his society’s problems. His response is to try to figure out what a self actually is. “All the world’s a stage,” he argues, “And all the men and women merely players” (2.7.140-141). The world is not a theatre. It is the stage itself. There is nothing outside the performance, nowhere for the actors to reassume their true identities. Furthermore, “one man in his time plays many parts” (2.7.143). A person’s life is not so much one big lie as many small ones. Moving away from medicine, Jaques shifts to natural philosophy. Like an Aristotelian scientist, he tries to demonstrate a universal principle (selfhood is a just a performance) through examples supposedly drawn from generalized experience.\(^{38}\) These famous first lines are a hypothesis that the rest of the speech will try to prove: whatever the truth is about man, it has nothing to do with fictions.

The first role in Jaques’ *dramatis personae* is “the infant / Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms” (2.7.144-145). Incontinent and dependent on its nurse, the infant is barely a person at all.
When he grows into a schoolboy, he starts to become an individual by learning to suppress his impulses, “creeping like snail / Unwillingly to school” (2.7.147). Later, he becomes a lover-poet “Sighing like furnace” (2.7.149). Although the similes shift from nature to manufacturing, the point is the same. Jaques consistently associates the artifice of playing a part with the nonhuman world of animals and objects. He uses these images to distinguish what really belongs to man from what is just part of a performance. Next comes the soldier, whose years of seeking “honour” and “reputation” (2.7.152) leave him “Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard” (2.7.151), as much a beast as a man. At the peak of his career, Jaques’ “one man” becomes a justice, “In fair round belly with good capon lined / … / Full of wise saws and modern instances” (2.7.154-157). The justice is not so much a person as a container for other creatures’ bodies and other people’s words. Maybe old age will reveal the truth about him? If anything, age makes it harder to see what a person really is, as the old man begins to disappear behind a cluttered foreground of objects. These include his “lean and slippered pantaloon,” “spectacles,” “pouch,” “hose,” and a voice that sounds like “pipes / And whistles” (2.7.158-164). Finally, in the “Last scene of all,” he vanishes completely into “second childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything” (2.7.164-167). Death clears away everything extraneous, including the body, and Jaques is still no closer to knowing the truth about his subject. He cannot even describe the oblivion he reaches at the end of his analysis. He can only talk about it indirectly by saying what it lacks (“everything”). Like the word sans that fills the spaces between the nouns in the last line of the speech, all that remains is the void around what has been cut away.

What exactly does Jaques achieve with his satire of human life? We still do not know what, if anything, lies behind the alleged fiction of selfhood. The duke’s men are no closer to ending their exile. And the satirist himself seems to know even less about humanity than he did when he started. Moreover, despite his love for classification, Jaques turns out to be a pretty terrible Aristotelian. In natural philosophy, knowledge about the world is knowledge about the natures of things. The philosopher discovers these natures through evidence from general experience. Jaques’ “one man,” however, is a very particular kind of man: an educated upper middle-class urban white male living in late sixteenth-century Europe. One life cannot support claims about “all the world” and “all the men and women.” That said, one thing the speech demonstrates clearly is that Jaques is really good at making comparisons. He uses similes to debunk his
targets. His comparisons turn more and more of his man’s identity into nonhuman things that are actually outside of him. Jaques’ similes, however, do not leave him with the knowledge of what a man really is. They leave him with nothing, and, as Aristotle points out, “that which is non-existent cannot be known.”

To put the problem another way, Jaques has completely changed his mind about the relationship between the human and the nonhuman. Earlier, he saw the forest’s mixture of nature and society as a liberating means to truth. Then he reverted to a binary view of man and nature informed by medicine and natural philosophy. More scholar than satyr, in the seven ages speech Jaques no longer sees the blurring of humans, objects, and animals as a source of knowledge. Instead, he treats nonhuman things as illusions that prevent him from knowing the truth. Jaques has no tolerance for life’s dramatic fictions. He wants to know who the players really are. As we have seen though, Jaques’ attempt to separate man from things, truth from fiction, in short, reality from art, does not bring him to better knowledge. Instead, it leads him to an unknowable void. His satire fails. He learns nothing, and nothing changes because he is obsessed with what man really is, rather than what he could or should be. As Rancière might put it, Jaques’ suspicion of the aesthetic means that change is not thinkable for him. Sidney articulates the same problem in the *Defense of Poetry* when he argues that poetry is the only form of knowledge that does not build upon or directly represent the world: “Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature.”

Jaques is not able to bring forward anything new that might offer a corrective to the schisms of act one. He can dissect and anatomize man into oblivion, but he cannot offer any alternative vision of life.

Nevertheless, Jaques is a poet. And despite its anti-aestheticism, the seven ages speech is one of the play’s most important aesthetic moments. When we see the speech as art, its failure becomes its most important achievement. Jaques, as I have emphasized, uses simile and metaphor to argue that identity is an illusion. He uses fictions to debunk fictions. Those fictions, like all aesthetic objects, say a lot more than their author intends. Clearly fictions can be a source of knowledge, because Jaques himself uses them to distinguish between true and false. The poetic elements of his speech resist the argument he is trying to make. They demonstrate the fruitlessness of a worldview that insists on a clear distinction between what is and what is not, between “sans” and
“everything.” In his attempt to get rid of art, Jaques produces something highly aesthetic. His speech does not just describe a way of thinking about the world. It alters and complicates our understanding of the very worldview it appears to affirm. Most importantly, it gestures beyond itself to another more complex view of truth that might be able to accomplish the social change that Jaques himself cannot. In closing down the viability of one understanding of truth, Jaques’ satire opens the door for something new.

5 Much Virtue in “If”

Jaques fails, but he fails like a poet, and poets can fail in very interesting ways. Two main things emerge from his satiric project. The first is that nothing has changed. The other, however, is that the aesthetic might have an answer. In the second half of As You Like It, Rosalind takes over as the play’s satirist.\(^{43}\) She too fails, though in a different way. Jaques focused on how the world misrepresents itself through art. Rosalind concentrates her satiric energy on the way art misrepresents the world. In some ways, her view is just as binary as that of Jaques. The key difference is that Rosalind’s scepticism consciously leaves room for the possibility that art might be something other than a deception. Rosalind’s satire anticipates the way that the aesthetic itself will turn out to be the hero of As You Like It.

Rosalind’s primary satiric target is the gap she sees between Orlando’s highly literary view of love and its sordid reality. Orlando spends most of his time in Arden writing love poems to Rosalind and hanging them on trees. Addressing himself in couplets, he skips through the woods crying, “Run, run, Orlando, carve on every tree / The fair, the chaste and unexpressive she!” (3.2.9-10). When Rosalind hears Celia reading one of these poems, she dismisses it as a “tedious homily of love” (3.2.152). Disguised as Ganymede, she encounters Orlando and remarks that someone has been hanging odes all over the forest “deifying” a girl named Rosalind. “If I could meet that fancy monger,” she says, “I would give him some good counsel, for he seems to have the quotidian of love upon him” (3.2.349-352). Rosalind’s point is that Orlando has mistaken the material for the spiritual. The poem turns her into a false idol. Like Jaques, she takes a physician’s view of her target: Orlando is sick and needs to be cured. Unlike Jaques though, her satiric cure will embrace rather than reject art as a means to truth.
In her attempt at “curing by counsel” (3.2.388), Rosalind (as Ganymede) tries to use misogynist satire to bring Orlando back down to earth. Ganymede claims that his “old religious uncle” was a lover who later in life turned to railing against love from the pulpit (3.2.332). “I have heard him read many lectures against it, and I thank God I am not a woman, to be touched with so many giddy offences as he hath generally taxed their whole sex withal” (3.2.334-338). These lectures are the theoretical grounding of Ganymede’s proprietary treatment for love-sickness. By performing the stereotypes found in his uncle’s taxing lectures, he cures his patient of love:

At which time I – being but a moonish youth – grieve, be effeminate, changeable, longing and liking, proud, fantastical, apish, shallow, inconstant, full of tears, full of smiles; for every passion something and for no passion truly anything … ; would now like him, now loath him; then entertain him, then forswear him; now weep for him, then spit at him; that I drave my suitor from his mad humour of love to a living humour of madness, which was to forswear the full stream of the world and to live in a nook merely monastic.

(3.2.392-403)

Ganymede says that he can correct a suitor’s illusions by acting out negative stereotypes of female inconstancy. The cured suitor ends up looking a lot like the sick one. He is pushed from one sexist extreme to the other, from idealizing women to hating them. This is only a problem if we take Ganymede at his word. In reality, the love cure is Rosalind’s scheme to get Orlando to woo her. The important thing about this moment is that it shows us Rosalind’s ambivalence about art. On the one hand, she wants to demolish Orlando’s poetic notions of love so that he can be a viable husband to her and heir to Duke Senior. When Orlando says he would die if Rosalind rejected him, Ganymede tells him not to believe the “lying chroniclers” who tell tales about the deaths of lovers like Troilus or Leander. “But all these are lies,” she declares, “Men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them, but not for love” (4.1.89-99). On the other hand, the satiric performance Ganymede describes is no truer than Orlando’s tedious odes. Strangely, rather than countering false with true, Rosalind counters false with false. She is attempting to reconcile her broader desire to make Orlando see the truth with her hope that a fiction will change their lives.

Rosalind’s satiric project is quite different from that of Jaques. Once again though, satire fails to lead anywhere. Rosalind wants Orlando to see love for what it really is, so she counters his unrealistic love poetry with equally unrealistic satiric poetry. In many ways her railing takes a more sophisticated view of art than Jaques’ does. Still, nothing changes because she too buys into the fundamental distinction between “sans” and “everything,” between what is real and what
is not. She believes that literature and drama can direct Orlando to the truth; she does not seem to believe that art itself is a kind of truth. The love cure is a just trick, after all. If a real relationship develops between her and Orlando, it will happen in spite of her fictions rather than because of them.

It may not seem like it, but the stage is now set for the aesthetic to transform the world of the play. Jaques and Rosalind have both reached a satiric impasse because neither can see art as anything other than a deception. Without imagination, change is not thinkable. The play is struggling against the limitations of what Rancière calls the “mimetic barrier,” the presumed boundary that prevents art from having any real impact on what it depicts. The Forest of Arden is the perfect backdrop for such a struggle. Arden’s hybridity is an ever-present model of thinking beyond the binaries that cause so much trouble throughout the play: past and present, nature and culture, freedom and bondage, and most importantly, truth and fiction. Arden implies that there is another way to think about the relationship between art and life. This view is the aesthetic, the idea that new art can lead to new life. It is what the play’s satirists ultimately fail to understand. Nevertheless, satire does allow Jaques and Rosalind to take a particular kind of knowledge as far as it can go. Their railing illustrates the problems and limitations of any worldview that takes the difference between truth and fiction for granted. And this realization is only possible because they are highly skilled artists, if somewhat reluctantly. Their satire, insofar as it is art, makes it possible to see something new. It demonstrates that as long as the mimetic barrier between art and world is maintained, satire is the best that the inhabitants of Arden can hope for.

Although she is sceptical about art for much of the play, Rosalind is the first character to recognize what the aesthetic might be able to do. She changes her mind when Oliver shows up and presents his sudden reconciliation with Orlando as an episode from chivalric romance. Oliver tells Ganymede that Orlando, like Chrétien de Troyes’s Yvain, encountered a snake and a lioness in the middle of the forest. Both animals were waiting to prey on a disheveled hermit, who turns out to be Oliver himself. The lioness, an animal of “royal disposition” (4.3.116), evokes the idealized past of hereditary nobility that Orlando wanted to recover in the first scene of the play. The predatory “gilded snake” (4.3.107) suggests Oliver’s relativistic world of custom, property, and exchange. Orlando chose neither, Oliver says. After scaring the snake away, “kindness, nobler ever than revenge / And nature, stronger than his just occasion” made Orlando fight the lioness rather than allow her to kill the sleeping hermit. Hearing the struggle,
Oliver woke from his “miserable slumber,” and in more ways than one (4.3.127-131). Montrose calls Oliver’s speech a “richly suggestive emblem,” because “[w]hat has taken place offstage is a conversion of the crucial event that precipitated the fraternal conflict, the event ‘remembered’ in the very first words of the play.”\(^{45}\) The conversion of the brothers’ lives into romance produces a conversion in their understanding. Their conflict becomes poetry. And through poetry, Oliver finally sees that he and Orlando are linked by law and property as well as by ties of “nature” and “kindness,” something he once refused to concede. For the de Boys brothers, poetry has proven to be more than just a mimetic copy of reality produced by lying chroniclers. They are now living proof that the aesthetic can radically change reality.

Oliver’s story completely alters Rosalind’s understanding of art and the role it might play in ending her exile. She too wakes from a slumber, a moment marked by her swooning at the rag soaked with Orlando’s blood. The tale is something straight out of the highly artificial world of medieval poetry. And yet the blood is so real that it almost makes Rosalind pass out. Evidence like that makes it hard to continue to believe that fictions are not deeply involved with life. The question for Rosalind is, how can she create this kind of aesthetic experience for other people?

Rosalind’s answer anticipates Kant’s observation that the conditional nature of art allows it to reveal links between individuals. Shakespeare compresses this insight into a single word: if.

When Oliver and Aliena (Celia) get engaged, Orlando tells Ganymede that he can “live no longer by thinking” (5.2.45). Ganymede tells him to “believe” instead. He claims to have learned to do “strange things” from “a magician most profound in his art and yet not damnable.” Ganymede promises that “If you do love Rosalind … when your brother marries Aliena shall you marry her … if you will be married tomorrow you shall, and to Rosalind if you will” (5.2.57-71). Another pair of thwarted lovers interrupts the conversation: Silvius, who loves Phoebe, and Phoebe, who loves Ganymede. Ganymede makes a similar promise to them while reaffirming his promise to Orlando:

[to Silvius] I will help you if I can. [to Phoebe] I would love you if I could. – Tomorrow meet me all together. [to Phoebe] I will marry you, if ever I marry woman, and I’ll be married tomorrow. [to Orlando] I will satisfy you, if ever I satisfied man, and you shall be married tomorrow. [to Silvius] I will content you, if what pleases you contents you, and you shall be married tomorrow.

(5.2.106-113)
The word *if* appears in nearly every sentence that Ganymede speaks in the last half of this scene and in the scene that follows. Rather than trying to get rid of fictions or hoping that change will happen in spite of them, Rosalind follows the example of Orlando and Oliver’s reconciliation in the aesthetic. None of her statements are false, and none of them are exactly true either. They are conditional statements that let Rosalind and everyone who hears her words imagine a future in which the incompatible desires of the lovers are resolved by her “potent art.”

When the time comes for Rosalind to deliver the promised new life, the conditionality of the aesthetic is what, in her words, makes “all this matter even” (5.4.18). Still in disguise as Ganymede, she reminds her father and the assembled lovers of their agreement. “[I]f I bring in your Rosalind,” she tells Duke Senior, “You will bestow her on Orlando here?” (5.7.6-7). “You say you’ll marry me if I be willing,” she says to Phoebe, “But if you do refuse to marry me / You’ll give yourself to this most faithful shepherd?” (5.4.11-14). Suddenly it seems that there might be a solution both to the conflicts between the lovers and, most importantly, to the duke’s lack of a male heir. Before the change can occur, Rosalind takes the crucial step of making it imaginable by coordinating her statements with the conjunction *if*. Touchstone states what by now is obvious: “your ‘if’ is the only peacemaker; much virtue in ‘if’” (5.4.101). The word *if*, that is, is the essence of the aesthetic. It initiates change by imaginatively joining what appears to be divided. Like the forest that symbolizes it, aesthetic conditionality provides a way of thinking beyond the opposition between fiction and reality. What the other characters take for Ganymede’s “art” is actually an alternative form of truth. This truth is not simply an inversion of world and mimetic representation. Instead, it is the recognition that life and art are, in fact, coextensive.

And then the Greek god of marriage appears onstage. In many ways, it is a jarring and bizarre moment. Shakespeare never explains Hymen’s presence in the forest, or what his connection to Rosalind is, or where his mysterious musical accompaniment is coming from. One way to make sense of Hymen is to accept that Arden, like the Athenian forest in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, is an enchanted place in which different realities coexist. “Sir Oliver Martex is available for weddings as well as Hymen,” Jay Halio observes. Shakespeare’s source for Hymen’s intervention certainly encourages this reading. Dusinberre’s edition points out that Shakespeare is adapting an episode from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in which Hymen, Juno, and Venus attend the marriage of Iphis and Ianthea. Unbeknownst to the bride, Iphis is actually a girl. “It’s Nature
alone, more powerful than all, who opposes / the match and is out to destroy me,” Iphis laments, “O Hymen! Why are you gracing / a wedding between two brides, where the groom has failed to appear?”

At the last moment, the gods grant Iphis’ wish and change her into a man. Nature is against them; fortunately, Ovid rarely gives nature the last word. Thanks in part to Ovid’s influence, early modern literature is full of supernatural interventions. Shakespeare’s own late romances are obvious examples. As a result, modern critics tend to see Hymen’s ritual in terms of what it means rather than how it is possible. And rightly so, because fussing about Shakespeare’s realism is as pedantic as it is anachronistic. Formally and thematically, the play’s magical ending is not as out of place as it first seems. Shakespeare is still addressing the same problems of family conflict that underlie the rest of the play. As Montrose argues, “[t]he atonement of earthly things celebrated in Hymen’s wedding song incorporates man and woman within a process that reunites man with man.”

Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the ways in which Hymen’s arrival really does mark an important shift. His arrival sets in motion the resolution that Rosalind promised in her conditional statements. As we have seen, the word if in these final scenes is a peacemaker, a conjoiner of the actual and the possible. In short, it is synonymous with the aesthetic. Hymen too is a conjoiner. He announces that “there is mirth in heaven / When earthly things made even / Atone together” (5.4.107-109). His effect is to “bar confusion” and “make conclusion / Of these most strange events” (5.4.123-125) by joining the couples together. The whole scene is highly artificial; it feels more like something out of a masque than a comedy. If, however, as Orlando and the duke both put it, “there be truth in sight” (5.4.116), a major change has just occurred. Hymen makes Orlando not just into Rosalind’s husband, but into the heir to the ducal throne. The marriage matters politically because, unlike Duke Senior, Orlando has shown himself willing to fight against fraternal injustice. By using drama, poetry, and music to bar confusion, Hymen performs the erasure of the boundary between fact and fiction. He also formally closes the play’s original rupture by blessing the de Boys’ brothers marriages. In short, Hymen personifies the aesthetic. His elaborate artifice is a transformation of the public and private lives of Duke Senior, his family, and his followers. By elevating Orlando, he offers the greatest hope of political change so far.

Even as we watch Hymen fix things, there is still a sense that Shakespeare continually defers the real change we have been hoping to see. Things are definitely better than they were. And when
Jaques de Boys arrives with the news that Duke Frederick has abdicated and become a hermit, the last obstacle suddenly disappears (5.4.150-164). The aesthetic triumphs once again by turning Frederick, as it did Oliver, into a conventional hermit of romance. But Shakespeare still refuses to show us the transformative effect of the aesthetic in its entirety. There is a very good reason for this, and it speaks to the depth of his understanding of what art can and cannot do. The problem with a play in which art is the hero is that art, as Kant points out, is not something you can ever be sure of. Rosalind’s *if* is only viable because it makes it possible to imagine situations in which the counterfactual might become factual. The difficulty is that making change thinkable does not mean that it will actually occur. And even when art sets change in motion, as it does in the last scene of *As You Like It*, there is no guarantee that it will succeed. These frustrations are an inextricable part of the aesthetic. Conditionality gives art its power to promise new life, and it also makes it impossible to know whether those promises will be kept.

And that is why, despite the groundwork having been laid for a return to a just society ruled by Duke Senior, Jaques the satirist remains sceptical and refuses to join the wedding party. “I am for other than for dancing measures,” he says (5.4.191). He would rather go find Frederick the “convertite” and extract whatever truth he can from him (5.4.182). Although Duke Senior asks Jaques to stay, he refuses again and speaks his last lines: “To see no pastime, I. What you would have / I’ll stay to know at your abandoned cave” (5.4.193-194). Rosalind’s interventionist aesthetic has not completely convinced Jaques. He derides it as a “pastime”: at best a frivolous entertainment; at worst another useless attempt to resurrect a past-time. When he returns from Frederick the hermit, he will wait for instructions in the duke’s empty cave. Jaques will also “stay to know” what the duke “will have” in a more literal sense. Will Duke Senior actually get his power back? At the end of the play, the satirist lingers on. This time though, he is not just a debunker of the aesthetic. In fact, Jaques seems to understand it better than anyone. He has seen some of what art can do, but he is not willing to put absolute faith in it. Paul Alpers takes a similar view. “Presumably the duke and his company return to court better individually and as a society,” he writes. “But had Shakespeare actually brought them home, he might have set them on the road to the tragedies.” Jaques gives us what an effective satirist always gives us, an awareness of limits. Through him, Shakespeare underlines the fact that Rosalind’s aesthetic solution cannot convince everyone. And necessarily so, since the promise of a better life to come through art always leaves something out—it’s complete realization in the here and now.
Importantly though, Jaques does not have the last word. Despite the doubts that remain, Shakespeare leaves his characters with something that is starting to look like what Le Beau describes in the epigraph to this essay as a “better world,” a hopeful future where “love and knowledge” are newly possible. Instead of choosing between the past and the present, or between life and art, the duke and his co-mates follow Rosalind’s example. They opt for the aesthetic and its ability to imagine an always-unrealized society to come. Before falling to their “rustic revelry” (5.4.175), Duke Senior offers a condensed definition of the aesthetic in all its potentialities and uncertainties: “Proceed, Proceed! We’ll begin these rites, / As we do trust they’ll end, in true delights” (5.4.195-196). The duke and his followers know that there is something fictive about their celebration, and all they can do is trust that their escape into art will be a return to life. Jaques, meanwhile, broods by himself in an empty cave. Although he wants to see a better world as much as anyone, his persistent doubt makes us wonder whether it will ever come to be. Like all those who are impatient to see the promise of the aesthetic fulfilled, he remains condemned, as Rancière puts it, to “a certain melancholy.”

1 See for instance Harold Jenkins, “As You Like It,” *Shakespeare Survey* 8 (1955), 50, and Jay L. Halio, “‘No Clock in the Forest’: Time in *As You Like It*,” *SEL, 1500-1900* 2 (1962), 200.
4 Jay L. Halio, “‘No Clock in the Forest’: Time in *As You Like It*,” *SEL, 1500-1900* 2 (1962), 200.
6 Kant, 89.
7 Kant, 88.
8 Kant, 183.
9 Kant, 185.


John Peter distinguishes native English “complaint” from the approach of a classical satirist like Juvenal. See *Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 3-11. For an account of how “the mask of the plowman” was further developed by Skelton and later Spenser, see Kernan, 41-52.


Puttenham, 120-121.


Drant, 7-8.

Drant, 11-12.

Drant, 20, 29-30.


I am borrowing the term *hybrid* here from Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Although I hesitate to categorize Jaques as a “modern” in Latour’s sense of the term, his attitude in the seven ages speech is very close to what Latour calls modernist “debunking” or “purification,” the attempt to explain away hybrids as easily separable combinations of the pure forms of nature and culture (43). Modern thought denies the very existence of hybrids, seeing them instead as “intermediaries” between two poles: “The modern explanations consisted in splitting the mixtures apart in order to extract from them what came from the subject (or the social) and what came from the object” (78).

36 Peter Dear, *Revolutionizing the Sciences: European Knowledge and Its Ambitions, 1500-1700*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 50. Paracelus’ theories were highly influence by alchemy and magic, yet his rejection of academic medicine and his insistence on direct mastery of nature as the means to treat sickness was an important departure from previous practices.

37 In the early modern period, anatomists like Andreas Vesalius began to work on actual human cadavers. Previous anatomists had used animals. See Peter Dear, *Discipline and Experience: The Mathematical Way in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 117-120.

38 Dear, *Revolutionizing the Sciences*, 7.


40 This emphasis on experience was one reason why Aristotle did not consider math to be scientific in his sense. Math measures and describes, but it does not explain the causes and natures of things. See Dear, *Revolutionizing the Sciences*, 58-69.


42 Sidney, 78.

43 Rosalind is not usually read as a satirist, and it might seem that Touchstone would be more obvious choice. I would argue, though, that Touchstone is not really a satirist. Unlike every satirist from Lucilius to Stephen Colbert, his mockery is not directed toward the goal of moral, political, or social intervention. Rosalind, on the other hand, qualifies as a satirist because she wants to change things. There is no indication that Touchstone’s clever riffing and wordplay are part of a broader desire to alter the world around him. Richard Preiss observes that a fool’s ridicule is directed at “the universality of folly … The Fool is thus a mimic, performing not himself but others. Whether … aping the courtier like Touchstone, the lecher like Lavatch, or the drunkard like Carlo Buffone, he grotesques humanity itself, deforming all values but introducing none of his own” (*Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014], 182-183). A fool plays along. A satirist wants to change the game everyone else is playing.

Montrose, 43, 44-45.
Halio, 201.
Montrose, 29.