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"Coscus onely breeds my just offence": A Note on Donne's "Satire II" and the Inns of Court

Ronald J. Corthell

In his useful survey of "Donne the Man of Law" Geoffrey Bullough argues that "Donne loved Lincoln's Inn" and that "his legal studies there and the atmosphere of the Inns of Court society strongly affected his writings."[1] Bullough is primarily concerned to trace the intellectual influence of Donne's legal reading on his religious thought, but "Satire II," a poem traditionally associated with Donne's Lincoln's Inn days, also informs us about the interrelationship of the Inns of Court "atmosphere" and his self-presentation as a satirist.[2]

Membership at the Inns of Court increased dramatically in the late 1590s, and partly as result of this growth a debate ensued over their function in English society. The Inns, of course, had always served a dual purpose; as Sir John Fortescue noted in the fifteenth century, they were called Inns of Court "because the Students in them, did there, not only study the Laws, but use such other exercises as might make them the more serviceable to the King's Court."[3] During Donne's residency at the Inns, these two functions were causing an increasingly sharp division between the serious law students, on the one hand, and the students of civility, those "gentlemen" of the Inns addressed by Ben Jonson in the dedication of *Every Man Out of His Humor*, on the other. The "gentlemen" were especially anxious to cultivate courtly postures and activities that would set them apart from the lawyers and law students with whom they were associated and whose social status was still not high.[4] As a coterie of wits Donne and his circle were defining themselves by opposition to a professional group which, as "Satire II" makes clear, Donne regarded as a threat to himself and to the traditional order of society.

If the activities of the young gentlemen of the Inns were antagonistic to the purposes of the legal professionals there, they were no less

motivated by careerism. Richard Helgerson has reminded us of the extra-literary ambitions of these Renaissance amateurs: the self-concious adoption of the prodigal role always entailed a return to the world of responsibility, achievement, and power so bravely dismissed in Donne's love poems. The Inns served the gentlemen (sometimes, very young gentlemen—Donne was 19 when he entered Thavies Inn) as a kind of liminal place where they could make the passage from parental control to the larger social circle where they would assume their occupational identities. Their extravagant wit and manners were manipulations of the courtly codes, linguistic and behavioral, which they would have to master in order to enter the Elizabethan system of preferment and privilege. The social conflict at the Inns, then, can also be seen as a conflict between two systems of advancement: professionals like Coscus used the legal system, while the amateur gentlemen sought connections with the Court.[5]

"Satire II" not only reflects this social conflict at the Inns but participates in it as the satirist works to gain the rhetorical upper hand over Coscus. Composed in the competitive conditions of the Inns, the poem is powered by the "tropes of courtesy" recently classified by Frank Whigham.[6] It is not surprising that courtesy literature should contribute to the method of late Elizabethan satirists; it comprised the period's most extensive and coherent system of thinking about self-presentation, a preoccupation of sixteenth-century satirists noted by critics of the genre from Alvin Kernan with his notion of the satyr-persona to M. Thomas Hester and his Christian satirist.[7] As Whigham points out, courtesy literature was invented to maintain a status quo, but it could also be manipulated to undermine the established order. These mixed motives of rhetoric produced the contradictions of courtly (and, I propose, satiric) self-presentation—"weird phenomenological mixtures of arrogance and paranoia, each factor deriving from a desperate need for coherence, between the normative humanist expectations of the university and the murky resistant realities of court life as lived"[8]—between, that is, humanist theory and social practice. Satirists of the 1590s use the figures of courtly rhetoric both conservatively and subversively, sometimes slipping from one purpose to the other in the same poem. As a conservative device the satiric version of courtly rhetoric serves two purposes: it generates a protective definition of the true courtier-satirist, as opposed to the false courtiers, the satiric butts; and, as Whigham maintains, it also relieves strain "by postponing, accounting for, or mystifying the various levels of personal failure."[9] The subversive motive is most apparent in those reflexive moments when the satirist discloses his own entrapment in a false system of signification such as the Court.

Donne's rhetoric is primarily conservative in "Satire II," though lines 69-70 ("lye in everything / Like a Kings favourite, yea like a King"[10]) constitute a subversive glance that becomes a vision during the account of a visit to Court in "Satire IV."

Donne's ironic ridicule of the poets at the beginning of "Satire II" traces a classic maneuver of courtly self-promotion. Devaluing the work of poets to a level of insignificance, Donne deflects the reader's attention from the poetic game of advancement to Coscus's practice of law "for meere gaine" (63).[11] Speaking for the coterie evoked by the nameless "Sir" addressed in line 1, Donne is particularly indignant at "the insolence / Of Coscus" who "was (alas) of late / But a scarce Poet" (39-40, 43-44). Coscus's abandonment of poetry for the law is an important element in Donne's satire: "When sicke with Poetrie, 'and possest with muse / Thou wast, and mad, I hop'd" (61-62). This defection from the ranks of the poets is aggravated by Coscus's pathetic attempts to continue as a poet writing in a strained metaphysical style that wooes "in language of the Pleas, and Bench" (48). The love poets pitied by Donne rely upon the magical, incantatory power of language, "but witchcrafts charms / Bring not now their old fears, nor their old harmes" (17-18). Opposed to this mystification of poetic language is Coscus's affected metaphysical style which reduces poetry to the level of a legal "motion" (49). But Coscus's legal writings, more than his legalistic poems, are the objects of Donne's satire. Unlike the powerless rhymes of the Petrarchists, the writs of Coscus are changing English society by redistributing the land. They imitate both their author's voraciousness and the objects of his desire: "In parchments then, large as his fields, hee drawes / Assurances, bigge, as gloss'd civill lawes" (87-88). The flaws in Coscus's texts, unlike these in the works of the poets, are intentional: "But when he sells or changes land, he'impairs / His writings, and (unwatch'd) leaves out, *ses heires*" (97-98).

The figure of ironic deprecation is part of a larger courtly strategy of privileging amateurism and recreation over professionalism and industry. The satirists' disinterested amateur stance is implicit in his patronizing attitude toward the professional playwright who is forced "to live by'his labor'd sceanes" (14) and the poets who "write to Lords, rewards to get" (21), but it is chiefly discovered in his attack on the earnest careerism of Coscus. Coscus was formerly "sicke with Poetrie" and "mad," but his new poems confuse *otium* and *negotium*. His practice of law is marked by dull persistence; we observe him, "like a wedge in a blocke, wring to the barre" (71). His industry and thrift help him to capitalize on the prodigality of rich young men such as he could have easily noted at the Inns of Court:

> . . . spying heires melting with luxurie,
> Satan will not joy at their sinnes, as hee.
> For as a thrifty wench scrapes kitching-stuffe,
> And barrelling the droppings, and the snuffe,
> Of wasting candles, which in thirty yeare
> (Relique-like kept) perchance buyes wedding geare;
> Peecemeale he gets lands. . . . (79-85)

The busy lawyer "spends as much time / Wringing each Acre, as men pulling prime" (85-86); his profitable legal chicanery renders harmless by contrast the wasteful card-playing of courtiers (who, of course, fancied the game of primero).

Donne sharpens his attack on Coscus, then, by comparing and contrasting the lawyer's self-interested diligence with the prodigality and versifying fashionable in the circle of gentlemen with whom Donne associated at the Inns of Court. It is important to notice how much Donne's charge that Coscus is the chief of sinners depends on this rhetorical strategy. The sins of Coscus are, in fact, not extraordinary: his lying ("Like a Kings favourite, yea like a King") is merely symptomatic of a systemic rot; and his technique of omitting key words from legal documents, "As slily'as any Commenter goes by, / Hard words" (99-100), could have been learned from controversialists and interpreters of Scripture. It is Cocus's success, his power, that breeds the "just offence" of the satirist, who aligns himself with figures of powerlessness and dispossession—poets, papists, "ruin'd Abbeyes," bilked heirs, old landlords. By another familiar gesture of courtly self-definition, Coscus's success, attributed to his moral failure, is contrasted with the satirist's self-acknowledged disconnectedness, which silently testifies to his moral superiority (and, of course, better qualifies him to exercise the power that has been usurped by Coscus).[12] Against the new order that is almost literally being written by Coscus, the satirist opposes a naturalized traditional order that is a commonplace of sixteenth-century satire:[13]

> Where are those spred woods which cloth'd heretofore
> Those bought lands? not built, nor burnt within dore.
> Where's th'old landlords troops, and almes? (103-05)

Dispossession and absence, then, mark the old, true nobility with which the satirist identifies himself. His confession of powerlessness in the closing lines clinches this identification of the poet and a lost, natural

aristocracy while again executing the courtly maneuver of denying the seriousness of what has been said.[14]

Donne's characterization of Coscus as singularly hateful expresses a typical early modern attitude toward lawyers and the law. Lawyers have, of course, traditionally served as the butts of satire, but Renaissance attacks on them displayed a new anxiety. As William Bouwsma argues in a seminal article on "Lawyers and Early Modern Culture," "lawyers represented the omnipresent danger inherent in the increasingly mysterious machinery for social organization, before which the individual felt more and more helpless." To men like Donne who felt acutely the effects of being knocked loose of traditional moorings the lawyer took on special importance in his role as a shaper of the emerging order that was replacing the old agrarian society; he was, in Bouwsma's words, "an obvious scapegoat for the general guilt of a world in transition, made anxious not only by the immediate insecurities of life in society but also by the abandonment of old ways and values."[15] The "Hydroptique immoderate desire" which diverted Donne from the study of law, his subsequent guilt at having abandoned this study, and his delight in returning to Lincoln's Inn—this time as a preacher—reflect this early modern ambivalence about the law.[16] "Satire II" records an early phase of his strained relation to the law; Donne, the prodigal law student, uses Coscus to focus his anxieties about participation in a changing society. Donne rejected a career in law, a career which as Bouwsma's work suggests, could have placed him at the cutting edge of early modern culture; he chose instead to cultivate the traditional role of prodigal poet as a prelude to a responsible occupation at court. As an ambitious young man eager to gain entrance to the world of power, he could self-righteously despise, but also perhaps envy the success of Coscus, who played the game of advancement by improvising on the old rules.

Such an account of Donne's complex satiric motive might help to explain why Hester discerns the Christian satirist where John Carey finds only "self-advertisement within the court group."[17] In "Satire II" Donne represents himself as one free of the competition for status and power: "I do hate / Perfectly all this towne" (1-2). Hester correctly identifies the classical and Christian features of this stance, but these Christian humanist ideals are, paradoxically, embedded in a rhetoric invented to compensate for the failure of the Christian humanist synthesis as a program of public service. As a piece of poetic courtship, the satire might best be seen as what Frederic Jameson has called a socially symbolic act: "the imaginary resolution of the objective contradictions," irreconcilable in social reality, "to which it thus constitutes an active response."[18]

As a symbolic act, the poem is marked by equivocality; it is "at one and the same time the accomplishment of an act and the latter's substitute, a way of acting on the world and of compensating for the impossibility of such action all at once."[19] "Satire II" is a purely *symbolic* act in its evocation of Christian humanist ideals that contradict the social reality; it is a symbolic *act* in its strategy of neutralizing the contradiction by representing the satirist's self-interest as public interest. This equivocality corresponds to the poles of critical opinion on the Satires and is consistent with a problem noted by R. C. Bald in his account of this period of Donne's life—the contradiction between Donne's contempt for the court and his avid courtship. Locating the Satires within the social conditions and discursive practices of the late sixteenth century, we can perhaps begin to understand why, for John Donne, it was difficult not to write satire.

Kent State University

Notes

[1] *Just So Much Honor*, ed. Peter A. Fiore (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 57-94.

[2] John T. Shawcross has challenged the dating of "Satire II" during the Lincoln's Inn days as part of a broader argument for removing the Satires from specific occasions and seeing them instead as retrospective poems, "the products of a thoughtful mind viewing some of the evils of this world." See Shawcross, "'All Attest His Writs Canonical': The Texts, Meaning and Evaluation of Donne's Satires," in *Just So Much Honor*, p. 269. Although my reading of the Satires differs sharply from Shawcross's, I am indebted to his comments on an early version of this paper.

[3] Quoted in Philip J. Finkelpearl, *John Marston of the Middle Temple* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), p. 9.

[4] Wilfrid R. Prest, *The Inns of Court under Elizabeth I and the Early Stuarts, 1590-1640* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1972), p. 41.

[5] On "prodigality" and careerism, see Helgerson, *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1977). Donne's social and literary activities at the Inns are treated in David Novarr, "Donne's 'Epithalamion Made at Lincoln's Inn': Context and Date," *RES* n.s. 7 (1956), 250-63. On the possible relationship between the split at the Inns of Court and developing conflict between Parliament and the Court, see Prest, pp. 220ff.

[6] Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege: The Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy Theory* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984).

[7] Kernan, *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959); Hester, *Kinde Pitty and Brave Scorn: John Donne's Satyres* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1982).

[8] Whigham, pp. 21-22.

[9] Whigham, p. 21.

[10] W. Milgate, ed., *John Donne: The Satires, Epigrams, and Verse Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967). All quotations from the Satires are from this edition and noted by line number in my text.

[11] On the trope of devaluation, see Whigham, pp. 120-22. Hester offers a full appreciation of Donne's ironic stance toward the poets in *Kinde Pitty*, pp. 38-43.

[12] On this courtly commonplace, see Whigham, pp. 170-71.

[13] See, for example, Joseph Hall, *Virgidemiarum Sixe Bookes*, V. 2, and see the commentary by Arnold Davenport, ed., *The Poems of Joseph Hall* (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1949), pp. 238-45. Clayton D. Lein discusses "the strain of lost nobility" in "Theme and Structure in Donne's

Satire II," *CL* 32 (1980), 130-50. Although these matters continue to be debated by historians, Lawrence Stone's *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965) remains an influential account of the successes and failures of the older nobility in responding to social change. Stone notes that in fact "the older nobility showed a surprising readiness both to develop new resources on their own estates and to take a prominent part in industrial, commercial, and colonizing projects" (p. 380).

[14] Of course, Donne's evasiveness and solidarity with the dispossessed are also linked to his minority experience as a Catholic. Analogies and allusions distributed throughout "Satire II" associate Coscus's reshaping of English society and the Reformation. On Donne's Catholic posture in the Satires, see Howard Erskine-Hill, "Courtiers out of Horace," in *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Methuen, 1972), pp. 273-307; M. Thomas Hester, "Henry Donne, John Donne, and the Date of *Satyre II*," *Notes and Queries* n.s. 24 (1977), 524-27; and my "Style and Self in Donne's *Satires*," *TSLL* 24 (1982), 155-84.

[15] *American Historical Review* 78 (1973), 316.

[16] Donne's sensitivity about the law as a career seems to have persisted. Bishop Morton's secretary remembered that Donne, while abroad with Drury in 1611, had written to Morton about the advisability of taking up the law. But, as Donne's letters make clear, "when rumors that he intended to do so reached him from London, he haughtily pretended that he had never entertained any such plan" (R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1970], pp. 246-47).

[17] Hester, *Kinde Pitty*, p. 53; Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), p. 63.

[18] Jameson, *The Political Unconcious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), p. 118.

[19] Jameson, "The Symbolic Inference; or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis," in *Representing Kenneth Burke, Selected Papers from the English Institute* n.s. 6, ed. Hayden White and Margaret Brose (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 88-89.