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Satyre III No Satire: Postulates for Group Discussion

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Since my task this afternoon is to raise an issue that will prompt debate, the object here is not so much to try to lay down infallible truth as to formulate propositions that will elicit differences of opinion and stimulate thinking. Let me therefore call into question a standard critical stance on "Satyre III" that has long troubled me: namely, the insistence, overt or implicit, of much Donne scholarship on reading "Satyre III" as though it were part of a larger whole or occupies a pivotal third position within a unified collection of five satires.

This approach involves at least three sorts of often unspoken, sometimes unexamined assumptions. The first is critical in nature. Reading "Satyre III" as part of a greater entity betrays commitment on the part of most commentators to a subject-matter poetics. In the late twentieth century this is primitive, to say the least. The second assumption is historical, involving questions of sequence, order of composition, and dating of Donne's satires. The stance assumes that there was a *liber satyrarum*, that the date of this collection was early, and that "Satyre III" formed part of it. The third assumption involves genre. We assume the bundle of words that we label "Satyre III" to be indeed a satire and then proceed to analyze and date it exclusively as such.

Since calling into question our assumptions about genre will inevitably undermine virtually all our usual critical and historical assumptions about the poem, the question of genre is perhaps the readiest way to stimulate discussion of all these matters. I therefore take this occasion to challenge the notion that "Satyre III" actually is a satire. What if it is not a satire, but something else? Or if the poem *is* a satire, then it is one of a radically different sort from any of the other satires in the group to which it is assumed to belong. Let us examine some of the reasoning according to which "Of Religion" is commonly assigned its traditional genric label.

First, how do we know the poem is a satire?

If the poem were written in Latin iambics, the identification would be immediate. But the English equivalent, rhyming couplets in pentameter, provides no adequate litmus test to distinguish satire from the Elegies, the Anniversaries,

or a number of the Divine Poems, not to speak of other generic types. What scholarship through the years has argued, however, is that metrically "Satyre III" is less irregular, as it were less shaggy, than the other so-called satyr poems, and if this is so, the smoother coat suggests differentiation from the other satires, not kinship with them.

The traditional title of the poem likewise provides no adequate guide to genre, if for no other reason than that we cannot be sure that the titles we have are Donne's. Some of the elegies are occasionally labeled as satires, but we would not think of treating them as therefore constituting part of Donne's *liber satyrarum*, too. Similar arguments apply to the use of what appear to be stock Roman or Romanized Greek names like "Mirreus," "Graius," or "Phrygius." Whether these function in exactly the same manner as the name "Coscus" in "Satyre II" can be disputed, and the use of a Teutonic name like "Crants" in the middle of them all finds no parallel in the other satires, not to speak of Roman satire in general. In fact, Donne uses the device but once in the other satires, and his use of a stock (albeit feminine rather than masculine) Roman name in an elegy does not argue "The Anagram" a satire. If such names carry genric implications, then they best link "Of Religion" not with the other satires or the elegies but with the epigrams, in which Donne uses them more frequently.

What, then, about the argument, the mimetic posture, the plotting, even the style of "Satyre III"? Do these elements unite it with the other satires? First and foremost, the discourse does not constitute an attack of *saeva indignatio* against unworthy targets. It does not scorn or rail at religion as the other four satires attack court mores, fashions, law, or the judicial system; nor is the *desideratum* urged by the argument prompted by envy or other base attitudes in the speaker, as is not uncommon in Elizabethan imitations of Roman satire. Rather, the speaker administers rebuke as an act of love, of generous Christian concern for the well-being of others, and the target is neither criminal nor foolish, but to some extent respected and esteemed. Indeed, the very opening of the poem denies the pity and spleen of traditional satire. Scorn and tears are said to cancel each other out—the recourse is to wisdom via "railing" instead—and it is easy to argue that in so doing, the opening quatrain of "Satyre III"—quite the opposite of the lines opening "Satyre V"—is designed explicitly to differentiate "Of Religion" from, not identify it with, satire.

Secondly, what arguments are there against viewing the poem as a satire? Is "Satyre III" really no satire?

Several considerations suggest the unthinkable. In the first place, defining Donne's *liber satyrarum* as consisting of merely five pieces is arbitrary and unhistorical. Let us not forget that originally the collection often incorporated a sixth satire, even though scholarship usually discards the sixth as unauthentic.

Whatever we believe, some of Donne's contemporaries evidently thought of the group as composed of six units. Indeed, any "book of Donne's satires" that contained only five pieces would clearly be incomplete, for it would fail to encompass much of Donne's work in the genre. That is, it would not only exclude two explicitly "Menippean" satires—i. e., *Metempsychosis*, expressly subtitled a "poema satyricon" (or "satyr poem"), and *Conclave Ignati*, which is not only explicit about presenting *varia per satyram congesta*, but exploits the mixture of verse and prose conventionally associated with this subgenre—but would completely ignore certain of the elegies such as "A Tale of a Citizen and his Wife" (if Donne's) or "The Autumnal" that nonetheless seem to meet essential criteria of Elizabethan satire (and are occasionally labeled such in the manuscripts). Whether a song, a sonnet, or an elegy, for example, the latter poem, at least if taken in its own terms, certainly looks as though it were designed to bite like a satyr satire.

Let us not forget either that among the manuscripts, the place and numbering of "Satyre III" varies. It is not always present in manuscript collections of the satires, and when it appears, it does not always bear the number three. Neither does it invariably occur in the third position, but its place can vary from manuscript to manuscript. In other words, we cannot be absolutely sure from printed or manuscript evidence that "Satyre III" was the third in order or that it was composed as part of the suite of satires with which we connect it.

Moreover, evidence regarding the dating of the satire does not necessarily support the view that it was composed at roughly the same early time as the other four satires, let alone that it was the third in order of composition. Let us ignore as conjecture and therefore irrelevant to the problem the dating of 1620 that I proposed some years ago, even though I stand by it still. The point is that arguments for early dating are purely conjectural, resting largely on association in the so-called "satire manuscripts" with other poems presumed to be early. Even arguments dating the actual physical manuscripts earlier than the end of the second decade of the seventeenth century tend to involve dangerous circularities rather than bibliographical facts. Conjectural dating on the basis of verbal borrowing seldom yields much certainty either. In the first place, most so-called borrowings can easily be disputed. Worse still, even if one believes that an expression such as "runne wrong" is a true borrowing, not an idiomatic expression (whether English or other), *a priori* assumptions about dating usually carry with them unexamined conclusions about which is the model and which the echo, hardly a sound method of proceeding. But even if we grant that Donne is the source of the borrowing, not the borrower, this procedure brings us, if I am not mistaken, no further back than 1611 or so.

What, then, of internal allusion? There is little evidence of this kind in the poem. However, the reference to arctic exploration in lines 21-22 indicates that the poem is likely to postdate the other four satires. If the reference is to the Barents expedition of 1596 (not the one of 1594, as Milgate erroneously thought)—the

survivors did not return to Holland until the end of October, 1597, and the first account (in Dutch) did not appear until the end of April 1598—then the poem cannot under any circumstances antedate mid-1598 at the absolute earliest, and on this basis it probably stems from 1600 or later. If the reference is to Hudson's sufferings, then the poem can be no earlier than 1609-1610. In either case, the "satire" cannot stem from the early or mid-1590's, as proponents of the five-satire *liber* find convenient to hold, and it probably postdates the Bishops' orders of June 1 and 4, 1599, against (printed) satire, which puts it in a political matrix quite different from that conditioning the other satires. If we insist on linking "Satyre III" with the other four satires, then we should at least do so with full awareness that it postdates them by up to several years and that it could never have been the third satire in order of composition.

Most important of all, "Satyre III" seems utterly different from the other four satires in structure, entelechy, and effect. Satires I, II, and IV, for example, are all narrative in manner of presentation, presumably following the patterns developed by Horace, Juvenal, and Persius. "Satyre III," on the other hand, is purely dramatic. It is a monologue, featuring but a single voice. While it is not a soliloquy, in that it involves complication, in much the same fashion as Browning's "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's," there is nevertheless no second voice in the poem, and this differentiates it sharply from Satyres I, II, and IV, not to speak of most Roman satire, which, whether narrative or in dialogue, tends to involve at least two voices. True, "Satyre V" is also a monologue. However, it is cast as a verse epistle, not a mimetic poem (whether it, too, is a satire is a moot question); hence, the relationship between the "I" and the audience in "Satyre V" is utterly different from that informing "Satyre III," not to speak of the other three. I should add that this difference in structure between "Satyre III" and the other satires often finds an involuntary echo in the commentary of critics from Kernan and Lecoque to Hester, Marotti, or Baumlin. In various ways, they all note how Donne tempers the "satire" with meditative or epistolary elements, and such reaction hardly instills confidence in the way we classify the poem.

In critical terms, finally, the poem in the Donne canon most resembling "Satyre III" in structure, mimetic strategy, and subject matter occurs not in the satirical poetry, but in the "Divine" poems. This is "The Crosse," still another poem of entirely conjectural date (1607-09, according to Shawcross), and it resembles "Satyre III" in at least three essential respects not shared by the other four satires. Both "Of Religion" and "The Crosse" involve religious subject matter, something quite unusual in satire. Secondly, both eschew narrative or dialogue, consisting instead of purely dramatic monologue. Yet neither is pure soliloquy, for both begin dramatically as though in response to a remark uttered by another before the poem begins; each involves complication originating in consideration *in cursu* of the response of an addressee; and both depict an ethos of respectful benevolence correcting an object of earnest spiritual concern.

If, then, "The Crosse" is a Divine Poem or a Verse Epistle (I am not at all sure Gardner is correct on this point), then why is "Satyre III" not a verse epistle or a religious poem instead of a satire? Or if, conversely, "Satyre III" is a satire, then why is "The Crosse" not one too?

Ergo, I resolve: Whereas "Satyre III" is not a satire, and certainly not one in the same sense as the other satires; and whereas there is no certain proof that "Satyre III" was designed to function as a pivotal third poem in a suite of five Romanesque satires; therefore, critical analysis must begin by treating "Satyre III" as an independent entity, not as a part of a larger whole.

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