John Donne Journal
Vol. 10, Nos. 1 & 2 (1991)

Genre, Grammar, and Gender in Donne's *Satyre III*

M. Thomas Hester

"we are not getting rid of God
because we still believe in grammar"
—Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

"The eradication of idolatry amounted to the very rationale of the reformed Church of England";[1] Donne's *Satyre III* offers a witty response to that project. Spoken by a satirical "Sentinell" (a term Donne used in his Latin epigrams to denote the Catholic crusade), the poem appropriates the terms and lexicon of current religion controversy (as in *Satyres II* and *IV*) in order to suggest that the major threat to English "Soules" is the "idolatrie"(102) of an England ruled by Cecil and Protestant nominalisms, which have created a world in which only parodies of "our Mistresse faire religion"(5) prosper—thoroughly in line (from Donne's Catholic perspective) with the Lutheran-Calvinian heresy's *deus absconditus*, its metonymical Eucharist, and its displacement of the spiritual by the political in all aspects of English "devotion." Just as Petrarch figured the worship of Laura as erotic "errore" that was primarily the "love of her name" (in the opening palinode of his *Conzoniere* and his *Secretum*, where "Augustine" describes life in terms quite similar to the stream imagery of Donne's poem), so Donne figures contemporary English worship as a nominalist worship of names and symbols, remarkable for its absence of Presence. As with many of his lyrics, the search for "true religion"(43) in *Satyre III* finds "No where" in England a church "true, and faire" ("Song: Goe").[2]

Donne's own guideline is useful in characterizing *Satyre III*: "In all Metricall compositions," he wrote, "the last clause . . . it is that makes it currant" (*Sermons* 6:41).[3] The last two lines of Donne's meditative re-vision of *Juvenal X* provide apt conclusion to both the third section of the poem and the poem overall:

> So perish Soules, which more chuse mens unjust
> Power from God claym'd, then God himselfe to trust.
> (109-10)

A final warning about the dangers of heresy (L/Gk *hairein*, "to choose"), especially when the will becomes subject to the "tyrannous . . . stream" (103-08) of politics (figured to recall Machiavelli's description of Dame Fortune as "*fiumi*

rovinosi")—about how it is "idolatrie" to be "humble" to power once "her bounds [are] past [and] her nature,'and name is changed" (101-02)—the final couplet of the poem provides the final generic *laus* to balance the poem's general *vituperatio*. "So perish Soules"—i.e., *thus* perish souls—offers a crisp epigrammatic reminder, that is, that the previous 108 lines of the poem have served primarily as a dramatic *satirical* warning about a "currant" eternal problem: the loss of free will and the absence of "true religion" in late Elizabethan Protestant England.

Such a view of the poem is sustained when we recall three things about "Satyre III": that it is a *late Elizabethan* poem contemporaneous with the Lambeth Articles and an increase in the enforcement of the penal laws against recusants; that it is a *manuscript* poem circulated among a circle of like-minded readers; and that it is above all a *satire*.

I say *late Elizabethan England* on account of the lexicon of current religious controversy on which the poem relies for its satirical thrusts (which I traced in my paper before this group last year)[4] and on account of the evidence the Satyres manuscripts provide about the composition of "Satyres III." In these manuscripts, John Shawcross points out,[5] the third Satyre *never* appears alone, never without at least two other of the satires, and often with other poems composed during the last decade of Elizabeth's reign: OQ1 (Queen's College, Oxford), for instance, has all five Satyres, "The Storm" and "The Calm," and "The Curse"—two epistles composed in the 1590s and a lyric which survives in a variant text that sounds as if it were earlier than the Group I manuscripts (which were probably based on Donne's own reputed 1614 collection of his poems). Similarly, B33 (Harleian 5110) has the first three satiress grouped with these two Elizabethan verse epistles. VA1 (Neve: Victorian and Albert, Dyce 16) has satires 1-5 and the two epistles, as does P3 (Heneage). Thus, the groupings of the third satire in these "early 17th century" manuscripts[6]—its circulation and association with poems from the 1590s—suggest its Elizabethan provenance. Jonson's argument that Donne wrote all his "best peeces"—which I take to be his *Roman* imitations—"ere he was 25 yeeres old" (by 1598) supports this dating,[7] as does his 1610 Epigram 94 which calls the Satyres "Rare Poems" (a comment on their unavailability as well as their merit), and his verbal borrowing from "Satyre III" in his own 1611 "Ode. To Sir William Sydney" (*The Forrest* xiv). We should also note, Shawcross reminds us, the treatment of material similar to that of the satires in two of Donne's verse epistles of 1598 ("Sir, more then kisses" and "Here's no more news"—poems dated by their reference to Thomas Bastard's *Chrestoleros*).

The manuscript evidence suggests, then, that Donne also meant "Satyre III" when he admitted in a 1600(?) letter accompanying ten of his 1590s Paradoxes that "to my satyrs there belongs some fear.... therfore I am desirous to hyde them with out any over reconing of them or theyr maker" (*Burley* 296^{v}). This letter reminds us again that these are late Elizabethan manuscript *satires*—a generic coding slighted in our readings of "Satyre III" solely as meditation, oration, case of conscience, verse epistle, personal apologia, public panegyric, or unequivocal

revelation of where precisely Donne himself stood "inquiring right" (78) in the Counter-Reformation wars of truth. And—as referring to satire *in manuscript* (Donne would *keep* them "hyd")—this letter should thus remind us that "in a manuscript culture the text is not reducible to the letter; it always contains more than it says, or more than what its letters contain, which is why we are privileged to read between the lines."[8]

Now, as a "fear[ful]" late Elizabethan manuscript satire composed when Donne, as he said in 1610, was still "bound" to the "Teachers of Roman Doctrine," which "kept [him] evere awake in the feare of Martyrdome" (*Pseudo-Martyr* B2v), it is not surprising that the most severe ridicule of the dim-witted sectarian amorists in "Satyre III" is directed at the ideology of Protestant "idolatrie"; nor that Graius's confessional (self-)censorship is characterized by reference to that instrument of religious and familial repression and intimidation—the Court of Wards—from which John and Henry Donne had twice barely escaped (in 1576 and 1590) through the quick re-marriages of their widowed mother to (Catholic) stepfathers. Rather than contributing to any so-called "characteristically English"[9] religious tolerance, the portrait of Graius, in fact, is more severe even than that of the "Catholic" Mirreus. Mirreus is ridiculed only for reflecting the *idolatry* that "we here" bestow on the "Prince" (Elizabeth's preferred title) *in England* rather than for the practice of any Catholic doctrine—thus recalling the claim of Recusant apologists such as William Allen that the English Reformers privileged only what pertained to their own "temporal weal."[10] On the other hand, both ground and figure in the Graius portrait assault contemporary English suppression of the spiritual (and the amatory) by the political. In the dominantly mercenary imagery of lines 55-62 ("tender . . . tender . . . offer . . . valewes"), wives—including the Bride of the Christ—would become material objects or legal tender by which the political "wills," that is, the legal testaments and laws of godfathers or absent fathers instead of God or Father, enforce a mercenary system of oppression of the individual will, institutionalizing a sort of "Calvinian" denial of free will again according with the Recusant claim that the "valewes" of the Court of Wards were merely political taxations little concerned with devotion or religion or loyalty.[11]

The portrait of Graius as *one* fool who abuses his reason does not necessarily mean, of course, that there is no "true religion" in all of English practice; but throughout "the incompleted search"[12] in "Satyre III" "our Mistresse faire Religion" is noticeably absent. However, as an Elizabethan satire *in manuscript* it is possible that the absence of Presence in England is ironically—wittily—recorded in the poem in another way, between the lines. In his elegies Donne exploits the ugly-beauty convention in order to "say the unsayable"[13] about an old, ugly, meretricious "red-heade" whose "will [must] be done" ("The Autumnal," "The Comparison," "The Bracelet," "The Anagram," "The Bracelet"). In the same vein is Donne's characterization of the collective scientism of the five foolish English suitors of the Daughter of Time in "Satyre III"—their criteria that she be old

(Mirreus), "unhandsome" (Crants), bound by the "new fashion[ed]" courts of Cecilic rule (Graius), always the same, or to recall Elizabeth's motto, "*Semper eadem*" (Gracchus), and someone who "dares marry none" (Phrygius). This lustral group-parody of the divine epithalamion might just figure forth "truly" the "mistress" who had displaced Christ's Bride, at least in the imperial propaganda of late Elizabethan Court poetry (according to the Recusant view of England's illegitimate queen).[14]

Of course, as a formal verse satire the poem does also offer implicit *laus* in the fervent pleadings of Donne's "Sentinell." As in the satirical lyrics or even in the *Anniversaries*, despite the fear that "Shee is gone" the search for "a woman true, and faire"—for something "Invisible to see" (as the Bride of Christ is described in *The City of God*)—is yet "such a Pilgrimage [as] were sweet" ("Song: Goe"). Of course, it may be that in Elizabethan England treks up the hill of Truth only once *were* sweet—"ask thy father which is shee, / Let him aske his"(20-1)—that the hill facing Recusants was the Golgotha of Tyburn Hill, and that in the Virgin Queene's land of Calvinian *adynata* all "bee/False." Thus, the basis for the grammatical choices of the poem's *last clause*: "God himselfe to trust." Here the satirist offers an alternative to the spiritual suicide endemic to the Elizabethan call for a "*masculine* perswasive force" ("On his Mistres" 4) to engage the imperialistic New World colonizing project. As a response to the *ridiculae imitationes* uncovered by the poem's satirical anatomy, the last clause or *Satyre III* offers a *textual presen*tation of an imitative alternative to the world of "force" and false models: "God him*selfe* to trust"—or—"God *him*selfe to trust"—or—"*God* him*selfe* to *trust*." Typical of the rigorous precision of Donne's cadences in all his texts, the response to the age's emphasis on "Power" by the accents on "God," "selfe," and "trust" presents (actually re-presents) the trinitarian emphasis throughout the poem on the re-creation of the *imago dei* in the rational soul's three functions, while at the same time undercutting the masculinity of the rational self before the Father. Thus, through the identification of God as "him" and the simultaneous identification of the insignificance of the man as an *unaccented* "him," Donne identifies the femininity of all believers before the Bridegroom's eternal "Power." "Satyre III," that is, portrays England as a world of male "idolatry" of projects and brides (as "possessions" and worldly "gaine") which are incommensurate with man's capacity for wonder, a world of absent fathers, meretricious stepfathers (the world of Lord Burghley as *the* Stepfather of Elizabeth's "consuming" courts)—as a sort of literalistic political parody of the *Canzoniere*'s view of erotic wandering as a misdirection of that devotion of which only the daughter of Father Time is "worthy." In such a world it is not surprising that the Elizabethan manuscript satirist concludes his "fear[ful]" anatomy with the imperative atemporality of the infinitive, "to trust."

In fact, the tenseless grammatical form of the poem's *last clause* might best figure forth Donne's own position and his own advice in late Elizabethan England. Surrounded by poems which record the foolishness and "the sinne of Going"—to the city, the courts, the Court—"Satyre III" implies that he "would not goe," even

if told by one of the legion of informers who crowd Donne's poetic world that she were "at next doore." The "merit" he finds "worthy" of "indeavour" in such a world, he satirically concludes, is "to trust"—to trust himself to trust only God himself. Such a final directive might sound to some like a Calvinian admission of incapacity. But actually it is the *threat* to free will that animates the "perswasive force" of the poem *as satire*—as a satire on the world of Elizabethan idolatry in which all "masculine" force ("of force. . .and forc'd"[70]) must be exerted to glorify a political "Mistresse" (a Church and a "Prince") who has appropriated only the appearance or "names" of Christ's Bride. Read as a late Elizabethan manuscript satire, "Satyre III" is a poem in which we futilely "seek" "about. . . and about" to "find" an *unequivocal* statement of Donne's religious position. But as such it "stands" in the truthfulness of its fearful equivocations as one "means" by which Donne could maintain or essay his own "devotion" to his "fathers spirit"(11)—for a while longer. Whether read as a case of conscience (although one finding its directive more in Thomistic *syndersis* than in a proleptic Protestant casuistry) or as a meditation (of the type with which English Catholics replaced their prohibited public worship), *Satyre III* as an Elizabethan manuscript satire tells us more about the difficulty and the danger (spiritual and physical) that confronted Donne in his search for the "Presence" of God in Elizabethan England than it does about the sect he could finally "chuse" later. And as such, it offers a glimpse into the psychological dynamics that animate in equally equivocal textures his elegies, lyrics, and even his holy sonnets.

Perhaps it is appropriate to close with a recollection of a comment Donne made later, in a 1614 letter to Sir Robert Carre,[15] where he compares his poetry to his religion. Writing of his "inability" to compose an epithalamion for the scandalous Somerset-Howard marriage, he submits a wish that his

> Muse were onely out of fashion, and but wounded and maimed like free will in the Roman Church. . . . But since she is dead, like free- will in our Churche, I have not so much Muse left as to lament her loss.
>
> (*Letters* 270)

These words not only evoke the central topic of symbology of *The First Anniversary* and its lament of the loss of free will, art, and correspondence in the Protestant state religion, but also recall the lament of the second satire in its figuration of the political (and in "Satyre III" the theological) ramifications of the usurpation of the will by "the Calvinian heresy."[16] And when Donne continues in the letter to say that "Perchance this business may produce occasions, wherein I may expresse my opinion of it, in a more serious manner," he has in a sense wryly summarized the subsequent history of this "death" as traced in *Metempsychosis*, *The First Anniversary*, and all those love lyrics which oppose the truth of being "Loves martyr" to the "business" of the Prince's occasions.

North Carolinia State University

Notes

[1] Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts: Laws Against Images* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 343.

[2] The text of Donne's poetry is taken from John T. Shawcross, *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967).

[3] The text of Donne's sermons is taken from George R. Potter and Evelyn Simpson, *The Sermons of John Donne*, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953-62).

[4] See "'ask thy father': ReReading Donne's *Satyre III*," *Ben Jonson Journal* 1.1 (1994).

[5] "All Attest His Writs Canonical: The Texts, Meaning and Evaluation of Donne's Satires," in *Just So Much Honor*, ed. Peter A. Fiore (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1972), pp. 245ff.

[6] Peter Beal, *An Index to English Literary Manuscripts*, Vol. I, Part 1 (London: Mansell, 1980).

[7] Cited in *John Donne: The Critical Heritage*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 69.

[8] Gerald Bruns, *Inventions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 55.

[9] K. W. Gransden, *John Donne*, rev. ed. (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1969), p. 103.

[10] William Allen, *Defense of English Catholics*, ed. Robert Kingdon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), p. 119.

[11] I have treated this topic more fully in "Donne and the Court of Wards," *AN&Q* 7 (1994).

[12] Terry Sherwood, *Fulfilling the Circle: A Study of John Donne's Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), p. 199.

[13] Heather Dubrow, *Captive Victors: Shakespeare's Narrative Poems* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 236.

[14] On the "political" appropriation of Catholic and Marian iconography by Queen Elizabeth's polemicists and strategists, see especially Frances Yates, *Astræa*, and Roy Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth*.

[15] *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (London, 1651), p. 270.

[16] Thomas Wright, *A Treatise . . . of the Reall Presence* ([London], 1596).