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John Donne and the Astronomers in *Ignatius his Conclave*

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Within Donne studies, *Ignatius his Conclave* is a perennially neglected work. Often it is overshadowed by more illustrious texts from Donne's corpus;[1] the work is also notably absent from several discussions where it would seem a pertinent source of evidence.[2] Indeed, when *Ignatius* does appear within scholarly work, it is often positioned as being an additional source of evidence rather than crucial to the main debate.[3]

The discussions of *Ignatius* that do exist are also often couched in very specific areas. There has been some debate, for example, over the nature

[1]In *Donne: Selected Prose* (collected by Evelyn M. Simpson, ed. Helen Gardner and Timothy Healy [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967]), *Ignatius* is given the fewest number of extracts; it is also the smallest contribution to the collection of any of Donne's works.

[2]In *Donne, Undone* (London: Methuen, 1986), Thomas Docherty discusses Copernicus at length without reference to his characterization within *Ignatius.*

[3]In "John Donne and the Casuists" (*Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 2.1 [1962]: 57–76), A. E. Malloch succinctly demonstrates the significance of casuist thinking upon Donne. Here, Malloch's argument focuses upon *Biathanatos* and *Pseudo-Martyr,* turning to *Ignatius* only in the closing arguments as an additional feature of the main thesis. A similar situation arises in J. A. Mazzeo's "Notes on John Donne's Alchemical Imagery" (*Isis* 48.2 [1957]: 103–123), where Paracelsus's presence in *Ignatius* is noted as a side issue. It is understandable that not all works using *Ignatius* will treat it as a dominant feature; however, *Ignatius* is considerably underused with regularity.

of the satirical framework that Donne implemented.[4] Similarly, there has been some discussion of the character of Machiavelli as he appears within *Ignatius*,[5] and perhaps the most significant recent discussion has been that surrounding the printing history of the work.[6] However, the area that I will specifically explore is that of Donne's presentation of the astronomers. In particular, I will explore how this presentation can allow us an insight into the complex narratorial frameworks that Donne employs. Other readings of *Ignatius* have recognized the foolishness of the narratorial persona, but none has yet explored the potential for anything outside of a unilateral narratorial framework. I will demonstrate that, alongside the foolhardy narrator, there is also a further, authorial, voice which acts to satirize the narrator's views.

Debates on the presentation of the astronomers within *Ignatius* have traditionally been formulated around notional expositions of Donne's sincerity in his treatment of the astronomers. George Williamson argued that "The claims of Copernicus are answered by Ignatius by asking how his ideas have benefited Lucifer and by objecting that his opinions 'may very well be true.'"[7] Williamson's suggestion of Donne's acceptance of Copernican theory belongs to a school of thought initiated by Charles M. Coffin in his seminal work, *John Donne and the New Philosophy*.[8] R. Chris Hassel, Jr. has ably summarized how "Coffin understood Donne's attitude as one of religious scepticism and disillusionment, intensified by his admiration of the plausibility and the magnitude of Copernicus's

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[4]Notable contributors to this debate include Simpson, p. 57, and Eugene Korkowski, "Donne's 'Ignatius' and Menippean Satire," *Studies in Philology* 72.4 (1975): 419–438.

[5]Notably, Sister M. Geraldine, "John Donne and the Mindes Indeavours," *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 5.1 (1965): 115–131.

[6]Willem Heijtung and Paul R. Sellin, "John Donne's *Conclave Ignati*: The Continental Quarto and its Printing," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 62.3/4 (1999): 401–421, has offered opposition to the history proposed by "Verse from *Conclaue Ignati* and *Ignatius his Conclaue*," in *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, ed. Gary Stringer et al., vol. 8 (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 226.

[7]Williamson, "Donne's Satirical Progress of the Soule," *ELH* 36.1 (1969): 250–264; quotation from p. 260.

[8]Coffin, *John Donne and the New Philosophy* (New York: Humanities Press, 1937).

Brahe's, Galileo's, and Kepler's studies."[9] Hassel's article proceeds to offer a full, and unchallenged, rebuke of Coffin's proposals. Indeed, Samuel Y. Edgerton, Jr.'s observation that Donne's satire "with tongue in cheek, suggested that Galileo's discovery was all a plot any way" confirms the continuation of Hassel's reading.[10]

Hassel was not the first to oppose Coffin's reading. Louis L. Martz and then, more comprehensively, Frank Kermode opposed the idea that Donne had believed the "new philosophy" to represent the truth of the astronomical situation.[11] Even prior to Coffin, the work of Marjorie Nicolson suggested that, owing to *Ignatius* being satirically minded in its approach to the new astronomy, "in spite of Donne's obvious interest in the ideas, he does not here show any stirring of cosmic imagination, any pondering upon the philosophical import of the new conceptions."[12]

In this article, therefore, I give fresh attention to the significance of the astronomical figures within *Ignatius* (and also to *Ignatius* itself). Through a study of the presentations of the astronomers, I will seek to advance and refine the current understanding of Donne's presentation of the new astronomy. By way of a particular focus upon Galileo, Kepler, and Copernicus, I will also contribute to a debate on whether *Ignatius* provides us with an insight into Donne's personal conception of astronomical science. Finally, through this approach to the astronomers, I will attempt to distinguish the multiplicity of Donne's dissenting voices within *Ignatius*, something that has hitherto not previously been examined. The discussion of an authorial voice as present within the work, in addition to the readily discussed narratorial voice, will also be used to demonstrate the relationship between these two narrative frameworks. Ultimately, Donne's narrative persona can be seen to be a part of the fiction of his satire, whereby the authorial voice provides the

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[9]Hassel, "Donne's 'Ignatius His Conclave' and the New Astronomy," *Modern Philology* 68.4 (1971): 329–337; quotation from p. 329.

[10]Edgerton, "Galileo, Florentine 'Disegno' and the 'Strange spottednesse' of the Moon," *Art Journal* 44.3 (1984): 225–232; quotation from p. 230.

[11]Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954); Kermode, *John Donne* (London: Published for the British Council and the National Book League by Longmans, Green, 1957).

[12]Nicolson, "The 'New Astronomy' and English Literary Imagination," *Studies in Philology* 32.3 (1935): 428–462; quotation from p. 456.

reader with a framework that creates the boundaries within which the narratorial voice acts. When viewed in this way, the structure of *Ignatius* becomes far more complicated, and considerably more nuanced, than it has previously been credited to be.

The significance of the astronomers within *Ignatius* has been greatly disputed. Hassel questioned, "why are the astronomers included at all" if, "as Coffin suggests, the astronomical material functions only incidentally in a satire aimed at the Jesuits."[13] It would seem to be a matter of common sense that Donne's inclusion of the astronomers is not merely a flippant decision. Hassel is too strong, however, in suggesting that the astronomers are "equally [as] foolish and equally [as] dangerous" as the Jesuits within Donne's work.[14] Hassel has claimed that "Frequently . . . the Jesuits fall into the background as the new philosophers are ridiculed" to support his proposal that the Jesuits and astronomers receive equal ridicule within *Ignatius*.[15]

However, as Donne mocks Galileo's discoveries with regards to the moon he simultaneously suggests that the Jesuits might be relocated there,[16] and this is an attempt to focus what may appear a tangential aspect of his satire upon his core thesis. Donne does not, when ridiculing Jesuits, feel the need constantly to draw the reader's attention back to astronomical authors in the same manner. Equally, the book contains an "Apology for Jesuits" (p. 97), yet astronomers are given no such section within the work. That the astronomical figures are present at the very opening of the text and, with the exception of Galileo, do not appear again, while the Jesuits are an ever present figure within *Ignatius*, further discredits any claim of the two groups sharing an equally vaunted status within the tract.

Furthermore, while the astronomers clearly do not share the same level of significance as the Jesuits, they are not insignificant (and to suggest either position does a disservice to the work's complex treatment of the figures it represents). The astronomer's significance is elevated

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[13]Hassel, p. 330.

[14]Hassel, p. 330.

[15]Hassel, p. 335.

[16]Donne, *Ignatius his Conclave* , ed. T. S. Healy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 81. Further references to *Ignatius his Conclave* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by page number.

above that of the other intellectuals that Donne describes. Paracelsus and Machiavelli both figure prominently in the opening passages of the work, and yet—unlike astronomy—alchemy and political science do not reappear at the text's denouement. Thus, on a simply arithmetical level, astronomy is given a more extensive treatment than Donne's other intellectual "sins." It is also notable that Donne explores a greater variety of astronomical figures than he does alchemical or political ones within *Ignatius,* with both alchemy and political science represented by a solitary figure and astronomy by five. Thus, Donne offers us a richer, and more diverse, depiction of the "new astronomy" than his other intellectual sources. This quantitative analysis may be simplistic, but it demonstrates neatly the position that Donne affords to astronomers and astronomy within his work. The astronomers fill a significant, but secondary role within *Ignatius*, and the complexity we will later see in Donne's presentation of them offers us an insight into the underappreciated daedal nature of *Ignatius*.

Given the clear significance of the astronomers within the work, it is now important to establish the manner by which Donne and his narrator treat the astronomical figures. It is with the challenge, "Doest thou seeke after the Author? It is in vaine" (p. 3), that Donne opens his satirical tract, and the significance of the role of authorship throughout the work has been largely ignored up until this point. In its first appearance, Donne's work was "anonymous, undated, with no specification of printer, publisher, or place of publication"[17] and despite this supposed anonymity it is believed that Donne's authorship "was known in court and university circles."[18] The duality of the authorial role that is created by this scenario has great significance to Donne's later interaction with the scientific authors. The purpose of remaining anonymous (from his own title page) is seemingly a pragmatic decision. By remaining unnamed, Donne can absolve himself of any responsibility for the work he has then produced. Paradoxically, being *known* despite being unnamed puts Donne in a position whereby he can still gain notoriety from his work, while still remaining ostensibly "unnamed." He is at once author and bystander, and therefore can take plaudits for his work

[17]Heijtung and Sellin, p. 401.
[18]Simpson, p. 57.

without having to accept criticisms of it. Donne does not give such a luxury to the astronomical authors he references.

Galileo's *Siderius Nuncius* is referenced twice within the work's marginalia. Kepler's works are also named as references within the margins of *Ignatius*. Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus* is named within the text proper, as is Ptolemy's *Almagest*. The astronomers are explicitly tied to their literary output.[19] Nicolson has previously noted this interaction with science, via scientific texts in Donne's treatment of Galileo. Nicolson felt

> certain that Donne's interest in the telescope came not from instruments but from books. His allusions in *Ignatius* . . . are entirely to the discoveries of Galileo as reported in the *Sidereus Nuncius* . . . the reflections in his poetry of this period are entirely confined to Galileo's discoveries, notably in regard to the nature of the moon and the existence of other planets. I find no indication in his figures of speech of any actual telescopic observation[20]

and I would go further even than Nicolson. Not only is Donne's interaction with Galilean science born of an interaction with Galileo's texts rather than with his tools, the presentation of other astronomers

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[19]It is for this reason that I am not totally convinced of the position first proposed by Nicolson and later re-stated in Aaron Parrett (*The Translunar Narrative in the Western Tradition* [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004], p. 46) that Kepler's *Somnium* is of great significance to the structure and content of *Ignatius*. Donne is keen to interact with scientific knowledge (particularly focusing upon what is deemed "new knowledge"), and—given how vocal he is in his remonstrance against *Siderius Nuncius* (1610)—it would seem logical that he would be even more vehement in his treatment of *Somnium* (1611) as it is the newer of the two works.

It is also worth noting at this point that the only astronomical figure who is mentioned without his literary works is Tycho Brahe. The reason for this would seem to be couched in Donne's interaction with the "newest" aspects of the "new astronomy." Thus, Kepler, Brahe's student and successor at the Uraniborg observatory, replaces the need for Brahe's texts within *Ignatius* as he is both a direct successor of Brahe and as Brahe's student can be seen as being as much a product of Brahe as Brahe's literary output.

[20]Nicolson, p. 454.

within *Ignatius* focuses upon the literary output of the astronomers, and this is noted by way of Donne's explicit interest in them as authorial figures and of their works as "authored." Out of a false reverence, when Donne wishes to speak of "the planets, and of all those which are fixed in the firmament" (p. 7), he retreats from doing so, claiming:

> I thinke it an honester part as yet to be silent, then to do *Galilaeo* wrong by speaking of it, who of late hath summoned the other worlds, the Stars to come nearer to him, and give him an account of themselves.
>
> (p. 7)

In these lines, Donne's supposedly reverential tone bows before the superior knowledge of Galileo, and the incongruous nature of this reverence is in keeping with the suggestion that Donne's narrator is of limited intelligence. However, it would also seem that wrongly representing the heavens would personally wrong the *author* of those heavens. I use author here specifically, as Donne does not shy from discussing the contents of the universe because of the works of God, the creator of the heavens, but rather because of Galileo, who had so recently authored a work on the nature and contents of the heavens. By suggesting that Galileo's telescope "summoned" the other worlds to "come nearer," Donne implies a sorcery or witchcraft about Galileo's actions which denies them the actual craft that was present in his designing and refining the telescope for astronomical use.

Furthermore, that the astronomical bodies "give him [Galileo] an account of themselves" is also undermining of Galileo as a scientist. If the heavenly bodies are telling Galileo openly of their natures, then the act of defining and discovery that Galileo undergoes within *Siderius Nuncius* is deemed worthless, as Galileo's scientific attributes are deemed mere reportage. The system Donne implies is more akin to the work of an author acting upon the inspiration given to him by his muse than to the efforts of a scientist making discoveries through empirical observation and scientific practices. Given the disbelief that surrounded Galileo's telescope—that its perspective on the planets could only give "an" account rather than "the" definitive account—Donne's use of "an account" is also noteworthy, as it suggests there is room for falsehood

within Galileo's work.[21] This gap for falsehood, combined with the fact that Galileo is presented as a sorcerer and author far more strongly than he is as a scientist, suggests that Donne's satire aims to destabilize the power of *Siderius Nuncius* not merely through the praise of an intellectually inferior narrator, but also by making it appear a collection of fictions. It would appear that the "scientific" nature of *Siderius Nuncius* is unimportant to Donne; rather, it is the authority of the author that he seeks to explore. In undermining Galileo as a scientist, Donne presents him as an author and, in making him an author, undermines the astronomer's authority as he is now synonymous with creators of fiction. Thus, Donne becomes allowed to question what is fictional and factual within the work of the astronomers since he has removed the "authority" that a scientific label would proffer to the works he is critiquing.

Furthermore, if we consider the "certaine spectacles" (p. 7) employed by the narrator to be a reference to Galileo's telescope,[22] then an additional demonstration of Galileo as an "author" is apparent. Not only does the use of spectacles directly reference Galilean terminology, but the narrator naïvely suggests that:

> *Robert Aquinas* when he tooke *Christs* long oration, as he hung upon the Crosse, did use some such instrument as this, but applied to the eare.
>
> (p. 9)

The ludicrous praise of the narrator is a biting criticism as the narrator's naïveté gives Galileo's device an air of silliness, but of more significance is Donne's connecting of the telescopic device with writing. The taking

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[21]The telescope was regularly criticized and findings through it often called into question, as Howard Marchitello has ably demonstrated (*The Machine in the Text: Science and Literature in the Age of Shakespeare and Galileo* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], p. 99).

[22]Maura Brady notes that it was not until after the publication of *Siderius Nuncius* that Galileo termed his device a telescope ("Galileo in Action: The 'Telescope' in *Paradise Lost*," *Milton Studies* 44 [2005]: 129–152; see especially p. 131). Thus, at the time of Donne's writing *Ignatius* the connection between the "spectacles" of the narrator and the "organum," "instrumentum" (both meaning "tool"), "perspecillum" ("something that is looked through") and "occhiale" ("eyeglasses") that Galileo deemed his device to be would also be heightened.

of the oration, in itself an act of authorship, is paralleled with the manner of Galileo's work. The similarity that Donne depicts between the act of the scientist and a key moment in Christian doctrine centers on the action of individuals in the roles of authors.

Clearly, this stripping of scientific authority and the philosophical concerns surrounding the nature of science as "authored" are issues that are beyond the comprehension of Donne's rather ill-informed narratorial voice. Rather, they give us an insight into Donne's authorial perception of the astronomical authors. Donne can be seen to interact on a philosophical and intellectual level with the destabilizing nature of "new" science by questioning the authority of the theories that new scientific literature presents. By demonstrating an awareness of the distance between what is "true" and the representation of "the truth" that authored works are capable of giving, Donne displays his personal authorial understanding of the failings of "new" science. We are also introduced to a metanarrative, outside of the view which the untrustworthy narratorial voice proffers.

The manner by which Kepler is reviled again demonstrates the concern that Donne had with the dual role of astronomers as both scientists and authors. Kepler, like Galileo, is made notable through his literary output. Donne notes that, since the death of Brahe, Kepler "*hath received into his care, that no new thing should be done in heaven without his knowledge*" (p. 7). If we read this proclamation as earnest, we are again witness to the gullibility of Donne's narrator. Kepler did make a proclamation similar to this, and the narrator's acceptance of such an absurdly arrogant claim once more adds to the depiction of the narrator as unable to distinguish between what is true and what is bravado. Thus, Kepler is damned by his association with the fool that is Donne's narratorial persona.

Far more subtly, however, these lines add to the distinction of Donne's authorial voice within the text. That the narrator praises arrogance may well characterize the narrator as a fool, but that Donne only chooses to present a discreditable piece of Kepler's literary output strengthens the prevalence of the authorial metanarrative. Kepler has been noted as producing both highly significant astronomical

understanding and occasionally ludicrous proclamations,[23] and here Donne reveals that he, too, recognized this fact. Donne questions Kepler as an author, therefore, owing to the inconsistency of his academic tone. The simplistic narrator is not capable of understanding the flaw in trusting Kepler's proclamation and yet we have the flaw highlighted by Donne's authorial voice. The use of this particular Keplerian phrase, without reference to the specifics of his scientific achievements, designates Kepler to be both an author, rather than a scientist, and somewhat absurd. Donne's insight into the flaws of Kepler's literary output adds a significant depth to his satirizing of Kepler. Despite how briefly the reader is allowed to interact with Kepler in the text, Donne has successfully managed to offer multiple criticisms, from both an unlearned and a highly learned and philosophical perspective. As both of these readings are incongruous should they be deemed to come from the same narrative voice, once more the issue of two discursive voices within *Ignatius* is emphasized.

Donne's authorial voice is again apparent in his uniting of authors and anonymity within his descriptions of Copernicus. Once again, Donne takes a key scientific figure within the field of astronomy and undermines him. Intriguingly, while Galileo and Kepler are named directly, Copernicus's name is withheld until after his description. This closely follows the manner by which Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus* makes its revelation of the Sun as being center to the universe. Copernicus withholds his discovery, treating it with great caution, and only revealing the nature of his proposals when he is finally forced to state the purpose of his work.[24] As with Galileo and Kepler, Copernicus is also wrongfully treated and the basis of this treatment is his literary output. Donne claims Copernicus to be the one who aimed "to finde, to deride, to detrude Ptolomey" (p. 13), and yet this is an unfair appraisal of Copernicus's work. Within *De Revolutionibus*, Copernicus is respectful of Ptolemy's work and, as previously stated, very cautious in his approach to

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[23]Theodore S. Jacobsen, *Planetary Systems from the Ancient Greeks to Kepler* (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 1999), p. 172.

[24]Copernicus, *On the Revolutions of the Holy Spheres*, trans. A. M. Duncan (London: David and Charles, 1976). For Copernicus's reluctant revelations regarding the Earth's position in his astronomical system, see especially pp. 49–50.

his own discoveries. For Donne to present him "scarce respecting Lucifer" as he screams at Hell's gates, "Are these shut against me? To whom all the Heavens were ever open," seems ridiculous, and further highlights the failings of Donne's narrator (p. 13). To any reader of Copernicus's work, this phrase is a clear and obvious piece of satire given its intentionally flawed understanding of *De Revolutionibus*. As with Galileo, though, Copernicus's importance to Donne's work is here, again, as a literary influence rather than as a scientific one; indeed, the structure and style of Copernicus's works are as significant to *Ignatius* as the discoveries themselves. Even when Donne does choose to note Copernicus's scientific achievements, he does so in a preposterously melodramatic fashion. Copernicus is seen to claim to be "a Soule to the Earth" as he "gave it motion" (p. 13), referencing the Renaissance idea that the soul is the part of an individual that gives it motion and also Copernicus's theory of a helio-centric universe. However, as we have previously seen with the presentation of Galileo's work, Copernicus's work is undermined by the manner through which Donne reveals his knowledge of it. If it was Copernicus who "gave" the Earth motion, it would appear that the Earth had no motion before Copernicus wrote of it. Rather than a scientific discovery, Copernicus's work becomes a scientific fiction whereby the motion of the Earth was given to it by his authorship. Thus, in this early description within *Ignatius*, we see Donne playfully undermining the scientific merits of these illustrious astronomers, satirizing not only their personalities but also their professions. Donne attacks the discoveries of early modern science, so as to turn discoveries into literary creations, and this is an action that is far too sophisticated to be the action of Donne's easily mystified narratorial persona. Rather, we are again presented with a complex philosophical voice, which may best be understood as Donne's authorial voice, which creates a metanarrative around the more readily accessible dim-witted narrator.

Therefore, it is true that the praise of Donne's foolish and arrogant narrator is damning of the authors he praises. It is equally true that for the foolish narrator to share a perspective with the astronomers criticizes the astronomers by way of association with Donne's narratorial voice. However, there is also a subtle metanarrative at work within *Ignatius*. When we consider Donne as a critical (by this I mean both literary critical and also satirically critical) reader of scientific texts, we are

presented with an intellectual dismissal of the astronomers' works. Given that the narrator has previously been correctly identified as a fool, such a reading cannot be drawn from the narratorial perspective, and we are forced to conclude that Donne's approach within *Ignatius* is far more complex than has previously been acknowledged. There is a simplistic mockery through the praise of an unwise narrator, but there is also an authorial voice behind this that dissects the works of Galileo (and others) in a highly learned fashion. This second voice within Donne's work is not used to attack specific aspects of the astronomers' works, as often the praise of the foolish narrator is, but rather brings into question the key aspects of the presentation of astronomical science. While the narrator's praise of the "certaine spectacles" (p. 7) with which he views Hell is mocking of Galileo's use of the telescope, Donne's authorial voice does not raise such humorous and topical satirical issues. Rather than attacking the tool of one astronomer in the production of one work, Donne's authorial voice blazons the philosophical concerns that surround the tool that all astronomers (from the most ancient to the most modern) had relied upon. Donne's criticisms of the astronomers being both scientists and authors is somewhat crushing to the idea that the work of the astronomical authors may be true. By presenting their understanding and findings in literature, Donne deems the astronomers to be authors in order to inherently weaken their arguments. Ultimately, the potential for fictionalization that is created by the act of writing creates a level of untrustworthiness within the perception of astronomical tracts. This larger, more philosophical, concern of Donne's couches the smaller, more blatant and humorous, satirical voice of his narrator. Given the attack on the written style of Copernicus, the noting of Kepler's tendency to offer opinion outside of his empirical findings and the fact that *Siderius Nuncius* is a document that contains a great many ideas but very little of the evidence that Galileo used to form these ideas,[25] it would seem that Donne's metanarrative offers a pointed and astute critique of the state of early modern astronomical writing. Indeed, such subtlety of understanding is unquestionably beyond the scope of his narrator and must therefore necessitate the existence of a second discursive voice within *Ignatius*.

[25]Galileo would later present his empirical findings more fully in the much larger, and more mathematically minded *Letters on Sunspots* (1613).

Donne's satire, therefore, is not merely a satire drawn from his reading of other people's works, nor is it a mere satire of his narratorial persona's failed understanding of its "reading." *Ignatius* offers the reader the opportunity to become involved in multiple critical narratives whereby Donne's understanding of his own authorship of *Ignatius* (and the inherent boundaries between the author, narrator, and reader) informs the critique that he makes of his personal scientific reading.

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