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# *Johannes Factus* and the Anvil of the Wits

Graham Roebuck

The letter addressed "TO THE HIGH Seneschall of the right *Worshipfull Fraternitie of Sireni*-acal Gentlemen, that meet the first Fri-*daie of euery Moneth, at the signe of the Mere*-Maide in Bread-streete in London" by Thomas Coryate "*From the Court of the great Mogul resident at the Towne of Asmere, in the East-erne India*" is the sole solid, strictly contemporaneous evidence of the existence of the Mermaid Club.[1] Dated Wednesday the 8th November, 1615, by the "Hierosolymitan-Syrian-Mesopotamian-Armenian-Median-Parthian-Persian-Indian Legge-stretcher of Odcomb in Somerset" himself, in a typically mock-sententious but self-proclaiming way, it was printed with four other letters, and verse accompaniments, in a 1616 edition, *Greeting from the Court of the Great Mogul*.[2] One of those greeted by Coryate is Donne:

> 5. Item, to M. Iohn Donne, the author of two most elegant Latine Bookes, *Pseudo martyr*, and *Ignatij Conclaue*: of his abode either in the Strãd, or elsewhere in London: I thinke you shall bee easily informed by the meanes of my friend, M. *L. W.* (p. 45)[3]

By 1616 much had changed. Coryate, who had set out on this his most ambitious, but fatal, tour in October 1612, cannot have known that his much admired friend and wit had taken Holy Orders on January 23, 1615 and that he no longer kept lodgings among the witty gentlemen seeking preferments. Indeed, it is likely that Coryate had had no opportunity to meet with Donne since 1611, in which busy year *Conclave Ignati*, *Ignatius his Conclaue*, Coryate's *Crudities* (to which Donne had contributed verses) and *Coryats Crambe, Or His Colwort*

*Twise Sodden* appeared. The *Crambe* (Latin *crambe* = cabbage; *crambe repetita* = stale repetitions), as short a work as *the Crudities* is enormous, adds more verses which were too late to be included in the *Crudities*, and some freshly composed macaronics, but none of these by Donne. A pirated work, appearing just prior to the *Crambe*, entitled *The Odcombian Banquet Dished foorth by Thomas the Coriat, and served in by a number of Noble Wits in prayse of his Crudities and Crambe too*[4] reprints most of the panegyric verses, including Donne's, which make up the astonishing performance by the Wits: the fifty-six mock eulogies prefacing the text of the *Crudities*, as well as introductory verses by Ben Jonson. Coryate comments: "such a great multitude of Verses as no booke whatsoever printed in England these hundred yeares, had the like written in praise thereof."[5]

Before considering Donne's contribution and the questions it raises, it will be useful to examine more closely its context. Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr*, dedicated to King James, appeared in January 1610. It is, as Anthony Raspa has characterized it, the "work by which one of the leading figures of English Renaissance literature made his entry into published writing."[6] Although its subject matter was amenable to public exposure (in a way that *Biathanatos*, written earlier, restrictedly circulated and unpublished, clearly was not) and a safe bet to win royal approval, yet Donne took precautions by testing his arguments on competent authorities in advance of publication.

The next step in the print arena—*Conclave Ignati*, in two 1611 editions[7] and Donne's own translation into English, *Ignatius his Conclaue*, also in 1611—is marked by an enigmatic reticence and an allusion, for the cognoscenti, to *Pseudo-Martyr*:

> The Author was vnwilling to haue this booke published, thinking it vnfit both for the matter, which in it selfe is weight[y] and serious, and for tha[t] grauity which himself[e] had proposed and obserued in an other booke formerly published to descend to this kinde of writing.[8]

At about the same time that this work was being published Donne willingly, it seems, descended to the level established by the horde of

wits who contributed their mock- and mocking eulogies, their macaronics and nonsense verses to the *Crudities*. This was in print before the end of March, and Coryate was making presentations of his book, along with his own peculiar high-spirited hyperbolical orations, first to Prince Henry, his patron, next, to the King at Theobalds, the Queen at Greenwich, Lord Harington and the Princess Elizabeth at Kew, the Duke of York at St. James's, several others of the nobility, and to the Bodleian Library.[9]

Soon, as we have seen, appeared *The Odcombian Banquet* and the *Crambe*. Donne's next published work, *An Anatomy of the World*, appears, probably in November 1611, in which month he departed with Sir Robert Drury on a continental tour from which he did not return (so far as we know) until September 1612. In the meantime *The Second Anniversary* appeared in early 1612.[10] The death of Prince Henry (November 6, 1612) occasioned the next acknowledged piece—neither Anniversary poems are acknowledged—which appeared in the third edition of Sylvester's *Lachrymae Lachrymarum* (?early, 1613).

It is curious that in three epistolary expressions of regret at having published the *Anniversaries* Donne uses almost exactly the same figure as that which he had used in *Ignatius His Conclave*, namely descent into print. In the first, *"To Sir* G. F." he writes:

> I hear from *England* of many censures of my book, of M^ris^. *Drury*; if any of those censures do but pardon me my descent in Printing any thing in verse, (which if they do, they are more charitable then my self; for I do not pardon my self. [11]

In the second, to George Garrard of 14 April, 1612, he writes:

> Of my Anniversaries, the fault that I acknowledge in my self, is to have descended to print any thing in verse, which though it have excuse even in our times, by men who professe, and practise much gravity; yet I confess I wonder how I declined to it, and do not pardon my self.[12]

Yet another letter of the same period (to "Sir," *Letters*, 253-57) repeats the same trope of descent to print in almost identical words.[13]

All three letters also exonerate the hyperbole of which his censurers complain, by saying that he would not speak of anybody in rhyme in other than terms of praise:

> I would not be thought to have gone about to praise any bodie in rime, except I tooke such a Person, as might be capable of all that I could say. (255)

In the first letter, that to Sir G. F., the trope is pushed even further by the qualification "printed":

> for that had been a new weaknesse in me, to have praised any body in printed verses, that had not been capable of the best praise that I could give. (75)

Here, then, in this crucial stage of Donne's career, we see a self-presentation of the unwilling author, anonymous, yet known, burdened by the sense of his own gravity, yet almost frivolous in his satirical or hyperbolical or competitively obscure voices. (It is well known that his epitaph on Prince Henry was described by him as an exercise in obscureness). He is unsure of what may be broached in public, yet writes with matchless verve and erudition. This enigma is to be set against the image of *Johannes Factus* in the two poems of denigration, to which he seems cheerfully to have descended in the *Crudities*.

This latter persona of a self-confident Donne, foremost among the wits, is supported not only by the company he keeps in Coryate's volume, but also by the evidence of a Latin poem, *"Convivium philosophicum,"* which conjures up a meeting of wits at the Mitre Tavern, Wood Street on September 2, 1611.[14] The authorship is variously attributed to Sir John Hoskyns,[15] to Coryate himself in full self-deprecatory flow, and to the mysterious "Radulphus Colphabius" (or "Calfaber").[16] John Reynolds conveniently provided a contemporary translation into English. The members of the *Convivium*, fourteen

in all named in the poem by facetious Latin names, include Christopherus Torrens (Christopher Brooke, the witness of Donne's marriage); Johannes Factus; Gruicampus (Lionel Cranfield); Janus Caligula (John Hoskyns); Henricus Bonum-Annum (Sir Henry Goodyer); Hugo Inferior-Germanus (Hugh Holland); Ignatius Architectus (Inigo Jones), and Coriatus himself.

"Veniat, sed lente currens,/ Christopherus vocatus *Torrens*/ Et Johannes *Factus*" reads the Latin, as the wits are given a line or two each until we come to Coryate, who is given the lion's share of the poem. The wits are like hammers:

> For wittily on him, they say,
> As hammers on an anvil play,
> Each man his jeast may breake.
> When Coriate is fudled well,
> His tongue begins to talke pel-mel,
> He shameth nought to speake.

After a number of verses on his exploits, the poem turns in stanzas 14 and 15 to praise the King and Prince Henry, but also to rail in satirical mode against abuses. The King takes care of religion, the people swear oaths of allegiance, citizens are busy at usury, soldiers and merchants complain, boys and girls copulate and women practise adultery.[17] Similarly, in stanza 18, noblemen build, bishops sanctify, clergy rant, but gentlemen sell their land, while rustics are duped by lawyers.[18] In such a world, Coryate, living by his wits—"Nec stultescit gratis," as the final line of *"Convivium"* runs—does not play the fool in vain.[19]

Coryate, however, is not portrayed as merely self-serving. On the contrary, his role is to channel the intellectual power of the wits and the learned toward the center of power and purpose, namely Prince Henry's court, in what is otherwise a land in disarray. A meeting of wits without Coryate, the anvil—also called "a tiller"[20] in stanza 5 of the translation, suggesting the importance of his role—would lack purpose and direction. Donne's relationship with the courtiers of Prince Henry—for they comprise the central group of those contributing to *Crudities*, although circles of interest, including the Universities, Inns

of Court and Parliament intersect—is perhaps dictated by his urgent search for employment. It is also worthy of note that a number of those named in the "Convivium" were alleged to have had connections with the Earl of Northumberland. He had suffered imprisonment for his supposed knowledge of the Gunpowder Plot.[21] One of the group, Hugh Holland, was known as a recusant. Possibly the active members of the Prince's militantly Protestant household were engaged in recruitment among those wits who, although of doubtful zeal for the reformed religion, were also disenchanted with the state of affairs. The "Convivium" seems to lend credence to such an inference. Although criticism of the conduct of affairs is diffused or oblique, presented even as praise for dealing with unpropitious circumstances in the case of four great pillars of state,[22] dissatisfaction with the lack of an appropriate role for Prince Henry is direct: "Prince Henry cannot idly liven" (even stronger in Latin: "Princeps nescit otiari").

Thwarted by King James, and unsuccessful in sundry other bids for office, the author of anti-Jesuit tracts, which are the two titles Coryate recalls in 1615,[23] becomes this Johannes Factus, and in that role can dispense with scruples about descending into print. But a question still to ask is how far did he descend from the standard he announces for the *Anniversaries*? Strachan's judgment of the longer of the two poems—"Oh to what heigth will loue of greatnesse driue," seventy-six lines, often irregular, of rhymed couplets—is that it is cruel—an epitome of the cutting scorn of the wits,[24] —but Bald, who detects "a note of extravagant chaffing" in the mock praises Donne affords Coryate thinks highly of it: "Not since the period of the fourth Satire had Donne given such a brilliant display of wit and high spirits."[25]

Very little has been written about either of the Coryate poems. The second, a quatrain, "In eundem Macaronicon," not surprisingly, deters the modern reader, but the former should repay closer examination, especially in consideration of its position in the sequence of Donne publications which this essay has outlined. It is not a disembodied instance of high spirit, but a document, however inscrutable, in the spiritual and intellectual struggle of Donne in those years of his anguished searching for a securely grounded religious position.

At first perusal, the poem does not seem to be other than high spirited and\or cruel. It plays with obvious and friendly irony on Coryate's quite amazingly self-assured account of his travels:

> Goe bashfull man, lest here thou blush to looke
> Vpon the progresse of thy glorious booke. (27-8)

This progress, at first imaged as the movement of the sun, is taken up in an extended conceit of the dismemberment of the gigantic body of the book into its constituent leaves, with whimsical anticipation of their fates. The use of these leaves in Coryate's intended travels to the East seems to point to the inevitable choice in his future writings of embracing either the higher matter of "The Myrrhe, the Pepper, and the Frankinsence"(34), or lower things. They, the leaves, may "stoope" (35) to become wrappings for "Currans . . . Figs . . . Medcinall, and Aromatique twigs" (39-40). The gifts of the wise men to the Christ-child and Mary (Mt. 2:11) seem suggested here, gold having been named four lines before, but also witheld by the interpolation of "Peppers," a word which does not occur in the English Bible. If higher matters are rejected and Coryate's leaves "stoope lower yet" (43) toward the mundane, his pages will be used used by merchants as wrapping material for "Home manufactures, to thicke popular faires" (44), as score cards by aristocratic gamblers, and for paper to use in binding other books. The scattered body parts of heroes do public good, but malefactors are cut up for demonstrations of anatomy. And so the argument, here briefly sketched, goes, with much wit and panache.[26]

But it is not my purpose in the brief remainder of this essay to analyse the blows of wit upon the anvil, but rather to point out several passages in the poem which seem more than coincidentally close to language he has employed in earlier descents into prose. Coryate makes no explicit mention of Hell in his description of Heidleberg but Donne writes:

> A Cellar gulfe, where one might saile to hell
> From Heydelberg, thou longdst to see; And thou
> This Booke, greater then all, producest now. (6-8)

Coryate describes his descent into the labyrinthine wine cellars and then to a "wonderful vast roome" where he saw the "monstrous miracle," "so monstrously strange a thing," the greatest wine barrel in the world.[27] Possibly reading this awestruck description of the cavernous setting and of the barrel, the "superlatiue moles [bulk]," along with Coryate's evocations of the labyrinths of Egypt and Crete and of Babylon, put Donne in mind of his own description of the inward and secret places as he passes by the suburbs of Hell in *Ignatius*, and may have suggested "*Sesqui-superlative*" of line 2. This is the sole occurrence of the element "sesqui-" in Donne's poetry—indeed this poem is a treasury of unique instances—but there is the suggestive parallel "Sesqui-Jesuit" in a Sermon.[28]

The reference to gold from the West (30) seems to refer to Coryate's putting up his estate as insurance against his travel, from which he made enough to pay for publication. The west here is Somerset, but it carries also the sense of West Indies gold from the previous line. In his learned commentary on *Ignatius*, Healy draws attention to Donne's identification of this gold ("*American* dung") as Spanish gold, the use of which "Ignatius" boasts of, and which Raleigh calls "Indian gold that endangereth and disturbeth all the nations of Europe: it purchaseth intelligence [etc.]" He also draws attention to Donne making the same point about this Catholic weapon in "The Bracelet."[29] There is no evident reason for Donne to invoke Catholic gold and Jesuit subterfuge in the case of Coryate, but if that is what can be construed from the lines, we may see Donne distracted from his facetious Johannes Factus role by his continuous musing on the politics of religion.

One final example concerns the use of "Gazettier" (24). The word is rare indeed. *O E D* gives this as the first instance, although the word Gazett, a Venetian coin of small value, arrives with Jonson's *Volpone*

(1605). In fact, Donne has used the word once previously: as it happens, in *Ignatius his Conclaue*. He writes:

> I found that a certaine idle *Gazettier*, which vsed to scrape vp Newes, and Rumours at *Rome*, and so to make vp sale letters, vainer, and falser, then the Iesuites Letters of *Iapan*, and the *Indies*, had brought this newes to *Hell*. (139-140)

It is surely this concern with the Jesuits which prompts the East-West Indies trope in the poem on Coryate, along with the vanity of the traveller's accounts. Donne's descent into facetious printed verse in the Coryate poem and his imaginative descent into the facetious Hell of *Ignatius His Conclave* seem to be underwritten by the same set of concerns and marked by curious similarities of language. These are readily called forth by the scenes from *Crudities* such as the descent into the labyrinthine wine cellar and the sight of the superlative barrel. They may also be prompted by Coryate's projected tour of the East. Underlying the literary manners, broadly farcical and satirical, of both works is "matter, which in it selfe is weighty and serious," as he wrote in *Ignatius*, for Donne himself.

Behind this puzzling, and perhaps inconsequential, poem in seemingly facetious vein, we catch the shadow of Donne, as loaded with the uncertainties of religious questions as Coryate was brashly free of doubt. Coryate was a Prince Henry kind of man all through—insulated by his certainties from doubts. Donne, however, is of different stamp, still a wrestler with problems, as he depicts himself in *Pseudo-Martyr*, one who has attempted to digest "the whole body of Divinity, controverted betweene ours and the Romane Church,"[30] and now descended into print.

*McMaster University*

Notes

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[1] See Michael Strachan, *The Life and Adventures of Thomas Coryate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp.144-47 for a discussion of the "spurious embroideries" associated with the Mermaid Club. It is not to be doubted, however, that groups of wits and poets and members of the bookselling fraternity, in various configurations, met at this location. Strachan notes that, at that time, the "High Seneschall" was probably Samuel Purchas (p. 287).

[2] Strachan, p. 295, gives the pamphlet's title page as *Thomas Coriate, Traveller for the English Wits: Greeting. From the Court of the Great Mogul.* (S.T.C. 5811), and refers to another issue *Thomas Coriate, travailer for the English wits, and the good of this kingdom* (S.T.C. 5812), of which only one copy seems to have survived. I am quoting the Theatrum Orbis Terrarum facsimile edition (Amsterdam: 1969) with the title page *Thomas Coryate, TRAVAILER For the English wits, and the good of this Kingdom: To all his inferiour Countreymen, Greeting* [etc.] also by W. Iaggard and Henry Fetherston, 1616. This is said also to be S.T.C. 5811, from a copy in the Yale University Library. It differs in some particulars from Strachan's text.

[3] L[aurence] W[hitaker] is the addressee of Letter 2. Letter 4 says that L.W. was "quondam Seneschall of the noblest society" (p. 38). He is not included in the wits of "Convivium Philosophicum."

[4] Strachan, pp. 136-137, discusses the likely candidates for the piracy, ruling out Ben Jonson, noting that John Taylor, the "Water poet" has been proposed, but giving as his own view that Thomas Thorpe, probably in league with Edward Blount, a fellow member of the Stationers' Company, both with reputations as "procurers of `neglected copy'," was the culprit. R. C. Bald, however, assumes that Coryate himself was responsible for the publication. See his *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 192.

[5] *CORYATS Crudities* (London: Scolar Press, 1978; a facsimile reprint of the "London, Printed by W.S. 1611" edition), "An Introduction to the ensuing verses" sig. Cv.

[6] Anthony Raspa, ed. *John Donne: Pseudo-Martyr* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), [xi]. Of course, Raspa acknowledges the several Donne poems and commendatory verses in print before 1610. His point is that with *Pseudo-Martyr* Donne makes a purposeful bid for a place in the arena of public political controversy.

[7] See Geoffrey Keynes, *A Bibliography of Dr. John Donne*, Fourth edition (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 13-17, where he identifies the second edition as a Continental edition.

[8] *Ignatius his Conclaue* London 1611 (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum facsimile, 1977), sigs. A3-A3v.

[9] See Strachan, pp. 130-33 for a description of the circumstances and excerpts from Coryate's orations.

[10] In a volume containing the First and the Second Anniversaries. See Keynes, p. 175.

[11] *John Donne: Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (1651) (Hildesheim & New York: Georg Olms Verlag, facsimile, 1974), pp. 74-75.

[12] *Letters*, p. 238.

[13] Richard B. Wollman's essay, "The `Press and the Fire': Print and Manuscript Culture in Donne's Circle," *SEL* 33 (1993), 85-97, provides a fascinating treatment of the trope of "descent" as a paradox by comparing Donne's use of the term in "The Ecstasy" and in these letters. Wollman's larger purpose is to counter the narrowing and simplifying effects of reading Donne in the currently fashionable contexts of power and society. To read Donne in this limiting manner is to reduce him "to a poet whose writings reflect only immoderate ambition and various underlying political agendas" (86-7). Donne's regret at descending into print, then, is not a token of unprofessional conduct but rather concern for "the damage print inflicts on his identity" (94), and for potential misrepresentation.

[14] The year is conjectural, but must be between September 1609—Coryate returned from his travels in October 1608—and November 1611, when Donne sailed for France. Of course, no such *convivium* may ever have taken place. Poems about poetic gatherings are often imaginary conflations of a number of occasions.

[15] See Louise Brown Osborne, *The Life Letters and Writings of John Hoskyns 1566-1638* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), pp. 196-99, the Latin text; 288-91, the English translation attributed to John Reynolds.

[16] See Strachan, pp. 302-3, for a discussion of this unresolved issue.

[17] Rex religionem curat,
Populus legianciam jurat,
Cives fœnerantur;
Miles et mercator clamant,
Puer<i> et puellæ amant,
Fœminæ mœchantur.

[18] Proceres ædificant,
Episcopi sanctificant,
Clerus concionatur;
Generosi terras vendunt,
Et, dum rustici contendunt,
Juridicus lucratur.

[19] Sylvester, *Lachrimae Lachrimarum* (London, 1612) uses the same categories with a few additions such as French-Italianate Courtiers who fashion their faith "after the forme of the State." All together are guilty of the death of Prince Henry

as, failing to reform their abuses, they have attracted divine retribution.

[20] Compared with the English, the Latin is bland here: unless Coriatus is invited, "jocus . . . erit imperfectus."

[21] See R.C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life*, p. 190: as late as 1611 it was alleged that a retainer of the Earl, Captain Whitelocke, who had special knowledge of the Earl's connections with the Gunpowder Plot, numbered among his intimates Inigo Jones, Richard Martin, Sir Henry Goodyer and Arthur Ingram, all named in the poem, and friends of Donne.

[22] Thomas Egerton, Lord Ellesmere, the Lord Chancellor, 1603-17; Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, the Lord Treasurer 1609-1612; Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton, the Lord Privy Seal, 1608-14 and Thomas Howard, Earl of Suffolk, the Lord Chamberlain 1603-1613.

[23] His recall of *Pseudo Martyr* as a "most elegant Latine" work can perhaps be explained by his supposing that this work started as Latin just as *Ignatius his Conclaue* had done.

[24] Strachan, pp. 139, 275.

[25] Bald, pp. 192-93. Curiously, Bald has little regard for Donne's poem on Prince Henry, written, it seems, in the context of the same social circle: "almost entirely lacking in depth of feeling [it] manifests an aridity that is the product of mere intellectual ingenuity." p. 269.

[26] Dennis Flynn, "The Originals of Donne's Overburian Characters," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 77, (1973): 63-69, argues that Donne's "The True Character of a Dunce"—"by mischance intangled amongst books and papers"—describes such a person as Coryate. Certainly the "roughness and artlessness" (p. 66) of Coryate's writing is consonant both with the Dunce and with Coryate's book ironically praised in Donne's poem:

> Then thus thy leau's we iustly may commend,
> That they all kinde of matter comprehend.(ls. 47-48)

[27] *CORYATS Crudities*, pp. 486-87.

[28] Gale H. Carrithers, Jr., *Donne at Sermons: A Christian Existential World* (Albany: S.U.N.Y Press, 1972), p. 105, where he discusses Donne's understanding of the fractured self and "sesqui-communions" (3.S17.822-823) and "sesqui-gods" (8.S5.490-500): "some one man that wavers in matters of Doctrine, and enclines to hearken after a Seducer, a Jesuit, or a Semi-Jesuit, a practising Papist, or a Sesqui-Jesuit, a Jesuited Lady." (7.S13.119-122)

[29] T. S. Healy, S.J., ed., *John Donne: Ignatius His Conclave* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 140.

[30] Raspa, ed. *Pseudo-Martyr*, p. 15.