

Naps upon Parnasus:
Some Attempts at Literary Humour in Elizabethan and Jacobean New College

Jokes do not travel well either in time or space, especially student jokes. And as most of the past comes down only in written form, we have lost many of the live cues and contexts that might sustain it. What is perceived as funny also changes specifically of the academic codes of closed communities, and even if we could read them, we might now

folly.

definition into laughing at forgivable

student genres of satire and epigram were perceived to be out of the metropolis, straying into, or accompanied by, unwelcome political and pornographic content.

It was all a little cleaner at New College, but not totally so, and how to give a handful of attempts at wit spanning the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods.

My first example is John Hiss (1566-1638) later in life a famous judge and friend of the poet John Donne. He came from Winchester to New College in 1585, took his MA in 1592. In this period, degrees were awarded following oral disputations rather than written exams, and one aspect of the ceremony that might strike us as odd today was the licensed jester known as the *terrae filius*. The *terrae filius* was typically a smart student expected to deliver a satirical speech on the proceedings. Hiss, however, misjudged the situation,³ and according to the later biographer John Aubrey, "My Rhymer's 7 KH VSHHF K GRHV QRW judging from later examples the problem will have been personal reference too poorly disguised, and thus shading into libel. A speech that was supposed to win applause instead expelled

Shall sympathize (thinke reader what thou list)
Crowrd with a quinsill tipt with marble pra[is]e [e6]r).

What links all these literary activities the terrae filius SHHFK WKH ¶ VHYHUDO VW\O
writer, these extraordinary nonsense veesles, ing towards and then rocking back from sense
LV + R VNLQV · V GHVLUH WR SOHDV Hex Studen) Writing Heay do Xey LHQFH
associated the academic and then legal milieux in which Hoskins moved. It is said, as I
¶ SHUIR, Hard Perfomances can go wrong

This can be seen in our second Elizabethan, the memorably named Thomas Bastard
(1565/6? 1618) For in 1591 the year before Hoskins Bastardoo was expelled from the college
for misperformance, this timfer offensive YHUVH WLWOHG LQ VRPH YHUVLR C
E D V WTD is Cash allusion to Martin Marprelate, the satirical persona of the anonymous author
or authors of some vicious and clandestine pamphlets of the late 1580s against the episcopal clergy.
% D V W D U G · V I D X O Mis Zevas Bk Qiflat Derad figures of the town, but seemingly
spilled over into criticism of identifiable university personages Each of the stanzas accuse a

does this is drama because it takes a community to write and perform. New College goes almost entirely unmentioned in any history of early modern drama, because we wrote and performed almost none.

Almost none. One of the more extraordinary days I have had in college was in 2005, the then fellow librarian and archivist showed me a damaged portion of an old manuscript found in a box marked "incredibly, 17 U D V K 3 D S H U V . 7 K L V W X U Q U I N O P X W W R". It was a Jacobean play, scribed in two hands, almost certainly in and for the college, and

Naps upon Parnassus

It is a clever imitation by the poet or poets of this play, and

a fairly simple chain of literary references for a student of the 16th century. Character Discourse has gone mad, and Fallacy is twitting him:

Disc. & HUWDLQH ·WLV VR QD\ , ZLOO PDLQWDLQH LW
in Delos, nor in the floating Islands Scotland.

Amb. · 7 ZHUH ILW WHU \RX AZITHYU LQ WKH , VODQG RI

Disc. Nor am I in a ship, that I should thinke the Earth moves.

Amb. If you be not, you deserve to be in the ship of fooles.

Disc. 1 R QR ·WLV(DUWQ LVR WKKUR ·G DERXW KLV VSKDH
a motion.

Amb. <RX DUH PRQVWURXVO\ GHFHLY·G ·WLV QRWKLO
(3.1)

Discourse is feeling dizzy. So he refers to Delos, because Delos and the Cyclades were conjectured in antiquity to be unfixed; and then to floating Scottish isles, because in the period it was claimed of the Hebrides and also of the isles in Loch Lomond too. As for Anticyra, a city in Phokis in Ancient Greece, this is where black hellebore was grown, the herbal cure for madness. Hence the phrase naviget Anticyra (am. Horace's Sermones ¶ OHW KLP VDLO IRU \$QWL for his insanity. The line on the Earth moving is a pun on the very epigram discussed above, of John Owen on: LOOLDP * LOE the Magnetic Earth turning round, now linked to a UHIHUHQFH WR WKH ¶ 6KLS RI) R Republic and the B HEKOW WLDWQK% EURD satirical Narrenschiff (1494). The combination of Anticyra and the Ship of Fools also occurred to the greatest writer in Oxford at this time, Robert Burton, who in his Anatomy of Melancholy (1621) wrote:

I am of Democritus opinion for my part, I hold them worthy to be in the company of disards, that they may goe ride the asse, or all saile along to the Anticyrae, in the ship of fooles for company together

This is a brand of literary humour powered by a combination of evocation and allusion, often sustained over long exchanges like a kind of literary tennis. Much of this derives from the study and performance of classical comedy in the grammar schools, the plays, as noted, of Plautus and Terence, but also Latin phrasebooks of schoolboy Latin speech derived from such writers. The smallest unit for this literature was the epigram, and the largest probably WKH SOD\ ¿ 4± U L SP HI (D RPP DBk DWY ¿ 4 P W·iYà †·YR., .¶/ r Ch™™™

>SRHWU\·V@ 5HIRUPDWLRQ DQG HQGHDIRXUHG WR DEVV
4XLGG⁹LWRVHW·FULWLFV \NLFDQ,S,RODQVHDDQSKQHJOHFW ¶6FK
together they evoke a world scholastic and metaphysical, in other words the very
educational culture which generated the student writers we have surveyed, and also provided them
with a shared set of mental tools which could be turned in on themselves for the purpose of
humour, and possibly even protest.

Finally, however, there is one limitation in all this, which is that we have only what was
written down. As writing at this point was so heavily controlled by the notion of imitating
established authorities and genres, it is hardly surprising that humour as epigram looks like
Martial, as satire like Juvenal, as comedy like Plautus, and as good form, but only seeming,
H[FHSWLRQ WR WKH¹¹ These were published, of course, but they purported to
record what we might call stand-up comedy

The jest book with which I shall conclude is called *Mobis salium* ¶ SLQFK It was V D O W ·
a manuscript collection of V X F K 3 L H F H V R I + X P R X U D V S U H Y D L O · G D
\$ Q W K R Q \ j : R R G · L H W K H J U H D W , W H Z D W R S U D L Q V R H G D I Q W P T : X
manuscript collection of jokes that title. It contains a few older, fairly literary epigrams on New
College figures, notably the Elizabethan Warden, George Ryves and on William
Meredith, the college organist in the interregnum period.¹² (Wood may have known of these as he
had attended New College Sol.) But Wood also collected a number of anecdotes about a
Wykehamist called Philip French. This man was of the generation of Richard Zouche, the lawyer
playwright encountered above, taking his BA in 1616 and his MA four years later. He
collegian in 1625 to the comfortable life of the vicarage of Chesterton and rectorship of Shipton
upon & K H U Z H O O , Q : R R G · V W L P H W Z R J H Q H U D W L R Q V O D W H
being told.

But they seem remarkably unfunny

\$ 6 F K R O D U R O R K L N · G D R W H W D W & R O O H J H G H V L U · G K L
Keys. His Friend, MPhil. French of New College, answered, you were better come in and
speak your self, for I think I shall scarce procure them

Mr. Phil. French

R I D G R R U D W R O F W I N D M E T I D Y E O G R A P H Y C A N B E P L A N T E D O N T H E L E V E L
street.

They also sound completely contrived: Why would French choose to wait by the college after curfew, on the side? And the last joke was seemingly but implausibly