Naps upon Parnassus:
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 wit 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: thinking specifically of the academe, the codes of closed communities quickly become unreadable, and even if we could read them, we might now find them trite, or sharing no common ground at all. This can happen very fast, as societies become more or less tolerant. What my student generation in the college found unstoppable in the 1990s—that reincarnation of Jonathan Swift, Chris Morris, was perhaps our comic idol—I suspect would now be widely denounced by a grimmer, more easily offended generation.

Pushing back to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries is harder still. Here student wit is so, well, *unfunny* that problems of classification and motivation arise. 'Humour' still retained its older, medical meaning of 'disposition', and was only gradually acquiring an extended meaning of 'odd' or 'whimsical' (the *Oxford English Dictionary* thinks from the late 1580s), and then some decades later its now dominant senses of an ability to be funny (1630s). 'Wit' still signified primarily quickness of intellect, which could but did not need to elicit appreciative laughter: a 'subtle wit' at the time would more obviously have described an agile logician. 'Joke' should have been common, as it is a straight borrowing from the Latin *iocus* and also available through Italian, but it is interesting that English speakers did not bother coining the word until the late seventeenth century; and 'fun' and 'funny' are only eighteenth-century words. Laughter itself was understood in two different ways. The older, Aristotelian idea was that comedy provokes laughter at people inferior to us or deformed in some mental or physical way; whereas a gentler Christian laughter associated with Erasmus retuned the harsher Aristotelian definition into laughing at forgivable folly.

For early modern students their notion of humour was controlled by an education which, because of its Latinate emphasis, stressed the link between ideas of sport, diversion, and playfulness. The Latin word they used was *ludicrum* (compare our 'ludicrous', a word now solely negative in meaning), which for them might apply to games, sport, theatre, or any literary 'trifle'. To take part in or produce *ludicra*, in early modern terms, was to perform in some way—physically, theatrically, or in writing. Given the overwhelmingly classical nature of education it is perhaps not surprising, then, that sixteenth-century academic humour imitated classical *ludicra*, usually through the literary genres of comedy, satire, and the epigram. Practitioners aspired above all to that intellectual agility they called in English 'wit', and in Latin *sal*, or 'salt', a metaphor from cookery—we would say 'adding some spice'. (Student initiation ceremonies, based on making entertaining speeches, were known as 'saltings'.) Most of these activities have split apart now as diversions from study: those who play football would not necessarily think that they are engaged in doing something comparable to those who put on plays, those who write in private, or those who do stand-up comedy. The closeness of student wit in these centuries to academic definitions of study and play also meant that such humour as survives is—for us rather crushingly—bound to academic values and practices.

Part of the function of modern jokes is obviously to look agreeable to peers and to reinforce community, although I think that advanced humour must also carry with it disagreeable and destructive elements too, or at least the frisson of their presence. Despite the academicism of earlier student humour, this double nature also holds true for our earlier counterparts—perhaps even more so. When the classical genres of satire and the epigram erupted in London in the 1590s, carried thither by superspreader students, the authorities were concerned enough to issue in 1599 what literary scholars call the 'Bishops' Ban', a condemnation of a list of suspect works circulating in London with the instruction that all copies be handed in to the Bishop of London be 'burnte', with orders for the future, such as 'That noe Satyres or Epigramms be printed hereafter'. We still debate what the motivation of this extraordinary act of censorship was, but it is clear that the

student genres of satire and epigram were perceived to be out of control in 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 I want now to give a handful of attempts at wit spanning the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods.

My first example is John Hoskins (1566–1638), later in life a famous judge and friend of the poet John Donne. He came from Winchester to New College in 1585 and took his MA in 1592. In this period, degrees were awarded following vocal disputations rather than written exams, and one aspect of the ceremony that might strike us as odd today was the role of a licensed jester known as the *terrae filius*. The *terrae filius* was typically a smart student expected to deliver a satirical speech on the proceedings. Hoskins, however, misjudged the situation, and—according to the later biographer John Aubrey—proved too 'bitterly satyrical'. The speech does not survive, but 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 got him expelled from both his college fellowship and the university.

Hoskins later wrote a manual on speech and style, and this interesting work shows how versatile the aspiring student writer had to be, and how 'similitudes' had to be drawn from whatever happened to be in fashion. This passage, for instance, illuminates the taste for 'metaphysical wit' so driven by Hoskins's friend John Donne:

> It is true that we studie according to the predominancie of courtly inclynacions, whilest mathematiques were in requests all our similitudes came from lynes, circles, & Angles, whilst morall philosophie is nowe a while spoken of, it is rudenesse not to be sententious, & for my parte, I'le make one, I have used and outworn several styles since I was first a Fellow of New College, & am yet able to beare the fashion of writing companie, let our age therefore onlie speake morally, & let the next age live morrally.[1]

Before leaving Hoskins, expelled from the college for being too risqué in his public humour, we should not pass over his later achievement as arguably the first poet of nonsense verse in English. In 1611 he published a poem in mock-praise of an eccentric travel writer called Thomas Coryate, himself the son of a fairly well-known New College Latin poet. By the end of his life the younger Coryate had travelled throughout the Near East and Indian subcontinent, walking, for instance, from Jerusalem, where he had the usual pilgrim's crosses tattooed on his wrists, to India, where he eventually died in Surat. Coryate's account of his earlier travels, *Coryats Crudities* (1611), was accompanied, somewhat bizarrely, by several dozen poems and addresses heralding the work, many unmistakably satirical. Donne, for instance, provided two poems, one in 'macaronic' style, i.e. written by alternating words from different languages. Hoskins took this one stage further, indirectly satirizing Coryate's eccentricities by producing a much-quoted series of nonsense verses:

> Even as the waves of brainless butter'd fish,
> With bugle horne writ in the Hebrew tongue,
> Fuming up flounders like a chafing-dish,
> That looks asquint upon a Three-mans song:
> Or as your equinoctiall pasticrust
> Projecting out a purple chariot wheele,
> Doth squeeze the spheares, and intimate the dust,
> The dust which force of argument doth feele:
> Even so this Author, this Gymnosophist,
> Whom no delight of travels toyle dismaies,

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[1] *The Life, Letters, and Writings of John Hoskyns, 1566-1638*, ed. Louise Brown Osborne (London, 1937), pp. 152-53, slightly adjusted.

> Shall sympathize (thinke reader what thou list)
> Crownd with a quinsill tipt with marble praise. (sig. [e6]r).

What links all these literary activities—the *terrae filius* speech, the 'several styles' of the fashionable writer, these extraordinary nonsense verses, edging towards and then rocking back from sense—is Hoskins's desire to please a learned audience. This is student (and ex-student) writing very closely associated the academic and then legal milieux in which Hoskins moved. It is all, as I said, 'performative', and performances 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, Bastard too was expelled from the college for misperformance, this time for offensive verse, titled in some versions 'Martin marre prelates bastarde'. This was an 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. Bastard's fault was once again libel: his verses took aim at certain figures of the town, but seemingly spilled over into criticism of identifiable university personages too. Each of the stanzas accuse a townsman or gownsman of misconduct with local women, naming faces and places. Bastard had to go. He responded by writing a kind of recantation poem in fifty-eight stanzas, being a dialogue between the shepherds Jenken and Jokey, the former proclaiming himself to be abused and misused. Bastard actually claims in this poem that he was not the author of 'Martin marre prelates bastarde', instead written by another naughty local shepherd called 'Damoetas'. But given the content of this 'recantation' I am not sure this disclaimer can be trusted. Under the usual allegory of sheep and shepherds and shepherdesses, Jenken complains:

> Is it not strange and to be marveiled,
> That course of kinde should nowe dayes alter so,
> As that two bodyes should have but one head,
> And that one head should take the charge of two.
> For what one hath that must the other misse,
> He cannot be trewe head of that & this.[2]

As the side-notes in the only surviving manuscript of this poem make clear, the 'head' referred to is the Warden of New College, and his two bodies those of his college and his wife. This is Warden Culpepper, and the rest of the poem expands upon Bastard's hostility towards Culpepper, and he even takes occasion to swipe at Hoskins himself for deserting Bastard in his hour of need. Now Culpepper, who had been Warden since the early 1570s, was one of the first Reformation Wardens of the college, and so had the right to marry, as the fellows still did not. They all therefore lived in a peculiar setup in which a married head of house presided over a theoretically celibate fellowship. Bastard clearly harboured a grudge against his warden for sacking him, and this poem can only have added to, rather than assuaged, any offence given.

After his departure Bastard continued writing, and he is best known for a volume of 285 epigrams which he published in 1598, called *Chrestoleros*. It appears to have escaped the Bishops' Ban, at least by name, but its content shows that Bastard's (and Hoskins's) sense of humour was, at least in literary terms, dictated by the cult of the epigram. This is significant because the epigram, modelled on the classical example of Martial, was at the time the signature product of a Winchester education. It is a neat way to teach boys verse composition and exercise wit, which almost always took the form of some kind of pun. As we will see, 'two meanings in one' is indeed the controlling device behind most early-modern humour of this kind. Epigrams were everywhere in the Elizabethan and Jacobean college: here I mention only the Latin poet John Reinolds (1584?-1614), and the epigrammatist and translator John Heath (*c.* 1585-?). Heath's *Two Centuries of Epigrammes*

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[2] Text from Bodleian, MS Add. B. 97, fols. 5-10, slightly adjusted.

(1610) (by 'John Heath, Bachelour of Arts, and fellow of New College in Oxford') were also accompanied by commendatory Latin verses by eleven poets in total, of whom eight sign as New College men. Heath addressed certain epigrams to past college epigrammatists such as Bastard and Hoskins, and so clearly saw himself, and wished to be seen, as keeping up a Wykehamist tradition. His epigrams almost always turn on contrived puns on his subjects' names.

Bastard's *Chrestoleros* had a mixed reception, and the following paired epigrams are selected precisely for their mediocrity. You can hear them as two schoolboys painfully punning with one another:

> Epigr. 12. *Of a pudding.*
>
> The end is all, & in the end the praise of all depends
> A podding merits double praise, a podding hath two ends.
>
> Epigr. 12. *A crossing of that Epigram.*
>
> A podding hath two ends? Ye lye my brother:
> For he begins at one, and ends at t'other.[3]

Later in life, Bastard also contributed to *Coryates Crudities*, but he retreated into the clergy and obscurity in Dorset, dying in the debtors' prison at Dorchester. Like his hated Warden Culpepper, he too married—but it appears from his poetry that he did not like his wife much.

My third example is probably the best-selling New College author of all time. This was the Welshman John Owen (1563/4–1622?), known internationally as 'Audoenus', whose Latin epigrams, first published in sets between in 1606 and 1612, held their reputation up to the nineteenth century. Then they disappeared. 'The British Martial' had first come to public attention while still at Winchester: his epigram celebrating the return of Francis Drake in 1580 was fixed to the mainmast of the *Golden Hind.*

Owen's period of fame belongs to his time after New College, but there is little doubt that he wrote epigrams from his school- and student days on, and merely collected them together for publication later. His most famous epigram is: 'Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis: | Quomodo? fit semper tempore peior homo' ('Times change, and we change with them: How so? People always get worse over time'). This encapsulates Owen's technique: an opening statement, often proverbial in character, and then some quick twist on it. Another epigram comments on the influential work of William Gilbert, the pioneering English scholar of magnetism, whose *De magnete* (1600) proposed in its final book that the Earth rotates on its axis:

> Ad Gilbertum
>
> Stare negas terram; nobis miracula narras:
> Haec cum scribebas, in rate forsan eras.[4]
>
> ('To Gilbert
>
> (You deny that the earth stands still; you tell us miracles:
> Perhaps when you were writing such things, you were on a boat.')

This is not to us funny at all, but Owen was probably thinking of an often-quoted couplet in the first book of Virgil's *Aeneid* on the perceived relativity of motion:

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[3] *Chrestoleros* (London, 1598), p. 60.
[4] *Epigrammatum libri tres* (London, 1606), p. 3.

deducunt socii navis et litora complent;
provehimur portu terraeque urbesque recedunt.[5]

('the companions draw the boats down and fill the shore;
we are carried from the port, and the lands and cities fall back').

It is a signal trick of this kind of literature: the turn or twist of the epigram depends either on some wordplay, as we have seen, or on some kind of allusion in theory immediately accessible to the target audience. In a fairly early use of the term, Anthony Wood in the late seventeenth century described Owen's achievement as 'an ingenious liberty of joking'. It is 'insiders' literature, of course, and the staggering popularity of Owen—he achieved forty-five editions by 1800 and was translated into several European vernaculars—rests on his neat performance of an exercise generations of schoolchildren were tasked with repeating: the construction of Latin epigrams. One way of explaining his popularity, therefore, is to think of his poems as akin to modern published sets of 'worked problems' in the more mathematical subjects. Not everyone was impressed, though: Owen, perhaps predictably, went into school-teaching, and the playwright Ben Jonson called him 'a pure Pedantique Schoolmaster sweeping his living from the Posteriors of little children, and hath no thinge good in him, his Epigrammes being bare narration'. But abroad, Audoenus was read by everyone with Latin; and no one had heard of Ben Jonson.
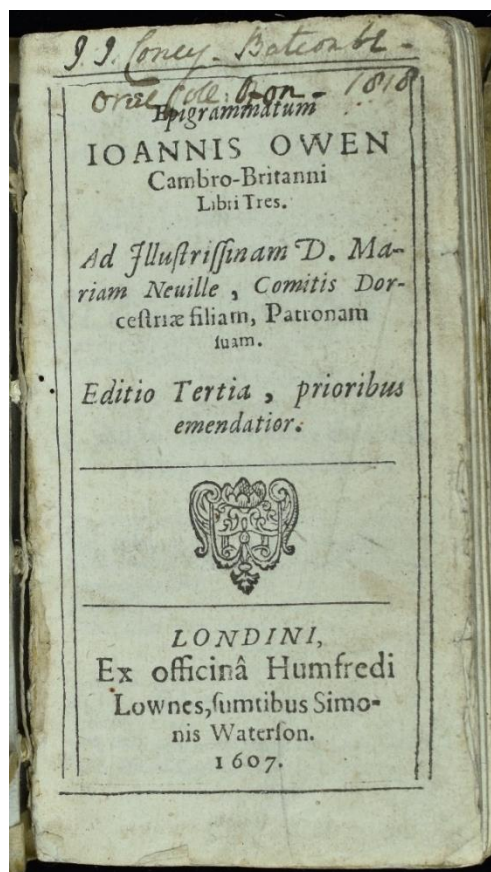
John Owen, *Epigrams*, 3rd edn. (London, 1607), New College Library, Oxford, BT3.54.28, title page

The epigram proved popular because it was something almost everyone of a certain educational background could do or be required to do. It had a low entry-level requirement, as we would say, and reinforced a sense of shared skills and community. The other literary activity that

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[5] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 3.71-2.

does this is drama, because it takes a community to write and perform it. Now 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 when, in 2005, the then fellow librarian and archivist showed me a damaged portion of an old manuscript found in a box marked, incredibly, 'Trash Papers'. This turned out to be fragments of an unknown Jacobean play, scribed in two hands, almost certainly in and for the college, and written in around 1615. It was a comedy, in English, and quickly revealed itself to be a free adaptation of Plautus's *Captives*, but with an added romance plot.[6] Although the names remain classical, the play has been updated for Jacobean tastes, and opens now with a 'Parasite', Ergasilus, who gives a long speech switching between prose and verse. He is a cheerful social contrarian who sounds like a comic version of Shakespeare's Edmund in *King Lear*:

> And whats a Parasite? A Parasite, is a plaine good fellow, of the first edition, y[t] lives much according to y[e] old law of nature and communitie; before Meum and Tuum began to sett men togeath[r] by the eares. Hee takes meate where he can finde it, and mony when he can gett it. Hath nothing, provideth nothing, yet wanteth nothing. what Tenaunts, Stuards, Caters, Cookes, and the like doe for your noble and gentlemen, that doe your noble and gentlemen themselfes for him; Though without land, or living; yet keepes the best houses in the country. and they faire best, that are most with him.

This 'paradoxical' discourse is entirely typical of the time and not at all Plautine: this was the age of the 'paradox' or 'problem', short prose sketches of seemingly outlandish or socially nonstandard positions. The period also saw the rise of the 'character', a sort of comically exaggerated stereotype, of which Ergasilus is one.

The 'New College Captives' also features a foolish old man, Demea, who thinks he is still able to attract girls in his late seventies, and in one complex passage he imagines being a tilting knight on horseback:

> Or were she sett as guerdon for desarte
> In *tilting* chivalry or feircest feight;
> I *stately mounted* clad in silver *Azur*
> With *stately plumes* crowneing my *stately mazor*
> Maugre there force, *before ten thousande eyes*
> *From all defendants* I would *bare the prize*.

Now, as my sharp-eyed senior colleague in English quickly pointed out to me, this was in fact a rather clever imitation of a heroic simile in the popular translation by Josuah Sylvester of the French epic *La Semaine* by the sixteenth-century Protestant poet Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas (I have italicised the shared terms in both passages):

> As Hardy Laelius, that Great Garter-Knight,
> *Tilting* in Triumph of Elizas Right
> (Yeerely that Day that her deere Raigne began)
> Most brauely mounted on proud Rabican,
> All in guilt armour, on his glis'tring *Mazor*
> A *stately Plume*, of Orange mixt with *Azure*,
> In gallant Course, *before ten thousand eyes*
> *From all Defendants bore the* Princely *Prize*.[7]

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[6] It is edited in *Malone Society Collections XVI* (2011).
[7] Josuah Sylvester, *Bartas, his Devine Weeks and Works Translated* (London, 1605), p. 135.

It is a clever imitation by the poet or poets of this play, because old Demea is supposed to sound ridiculous, and this is heightened by his flat repetition, three times, of 'stately'. This is obvious even without knowledge of the passage being imitated, but those in the know—or possibly just those told so by the proud student author(s)—can appreciate the more subtle effect of a bungled reworking of a heroic simile by a distinctly unheroic character.

The final passage I want to note in this play is spoken by the play's lover, Charinus, soliloquising about the object of his affections. He has hitherto been unimpressed by women, but now feels differently: 'I cannot leave her so, though women bee / Common & boyes yet are not such as shee'. The world of the student in this period was homosocial, and in theory there were rules about excluding women from even visiting the colleges. The literature of the time cannot help but be shaped by this social dynamic and its often nervous misogyny ('though women bee / Common'), but what is interesting about this play is that it implies even if it does not show women. And yet Charinus here also says something that might have raised an even more nervous laugh: '& boyes yet are not such as shee'. It's a vague statement, but it edges on an admission of possible homosexual attraction, even if here in the process of being superseded.

The only other New College play to survive from the period is also almost never mentioned. It is an allegorical comedy based on Aristotelian logic, entitled *Fallacy* in the sole surviving manuscript of the play, and *The Sophister* in its sole printed edition of 1639, which represents a revised text. Its compositional skill lies in the fact that each character (e.g. 'Fallacy', 'Ambiguity', 'Opposition', and so forth) stands for a logical operation, and speaks accordingly. Written by the famous civilian lawyer Richard Zouche—he was one of the founders of international law—in the 1610s, this comedy was clearly for performance. Although no record of this has been recovered, it is hard to see why Zouche would have bothered to write such an elaborate comedy in English as a mere exercise, and impossible to see why it would be revised, if performance were not intended. My best guess is that this was indeed staged in the college, in the hall, sometime between 1613 and 1617.

The play is set in the country of Hermenia ('Interpretation'), ruled over by Discourse, who is poisoned into distraction by his bastard son Fallacy, assisted by his servant Ambiguity. Fallacy then seizes control as the 'Great Sophism' (i.e. a pun on the Grand Sophy and the logical sophism). After various twists and turns, Fallacy's machinations are uncovered, Discourse cured, and Discourse and his legitimate sons returned to power.

Fallacy/The Sophister is probably the longest and most worked-out piece of New College literature from the period. Once again it very much relies on being an 'insider' to appreciate it fully. Presumably students drilled in logic as the dominant subject of their undergraduate degree—all students at the time followed the same 'arts' degree other than a handful of lawyers—found it highly amusing to watch characters called Definition, Division, Opposition, and Description define, divide, oppose, and describe. When Conversion enters with Aequipolency, the former happily 'converts' thus: 'Can *Aequipolency* endure all this? Can all this be endured by *Aequipolency*?', and Aequipolency appropriately responds by producing two equipollent statements: 'Who I *Conversion?* I can suffer any thing, 'faith ther's nothing that I cannot suffer'. And so forth. The play turns on the ability to detect logical fallacy, and as such is a kind of comic version of its actors' and spectators' serious study. And the Aristotelian logical fallacies, appropriately the subject of expertise of one of the college's current fellows in philosophy, were one of the topics all students studied. For Aristotle, there were thirteen fallacies, six that rely on tricks of words, and seven that work on a deception in the things themselves. The tricks of words include things like *equivocation*, where one word may be taken in more than one sense, the main driver of literary wit in this period.

Fallacy/The Sophister is very much an 'academic' play in the sense that once again its humour derives almost entirely from populating the classical genre of comedy (Plautus, Terence), with the content of the undergraduate syllabus, and finding ways to let the logical fallacies propel the dialogue of the play. Much of the enjoyment comes from a shared frame of reference, which renders dialogues such as the following almost meaningless to modern students, but deriving from

a fairly simple chain of literary references for a student of the 1610s. The character Discourse has gone mad, and Fallacy is twitting him:

> *Disc.* Certaine 'tis so; nay I will maintaine it, as long as I have any breath; for I am neither in *Delos*, nor in the floating Islands of *Scotland.*
> *Amb.* 'Twere fitter you were in the Island of *Anticyra.*
> *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.* No, no, 'tis even so; the Earth is turn'd about, his sphaericall forme is apt for such a motion.
> *Amb.* You are monstrously deceiv'd, 'tis nothing but the house goes round with you. (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 Anticyram* (e.g. Horace, *Sermones*, 2.3.166), 'let him sail for Anticyra', i.e. seek a cure for his insanity. The line on the Earth moving is an allusion to the very epigram, discussed above, of John Owen on William Gilbert's theory of the magnetic Earth turning round, now linked to a reference to the 'Ship of Fools' from the sixth book of Plato's *Republic* and then Sebastian Brant's 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 laughed at, a 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.[8]

This is a brand of literary humour powered by a combination of equivocation and allusion, often sustained over long exchanges, like a kind of literary tennis rally. Much of this derives from the study and performance of classical comedy and dialogue in the grammar schools—the plays, as noted, of Plautus and Terence, but also Latin phrasebooks for schoolboy Latin speech derived from such writers. The smallest unit for this literature was the epigram, and the largest probably the play, although Robert Burton's huge prose *Anatomy of Melancholy* shows that very sustained combinations of scholarship and wit could be achieved.

Above all, this was a culture of imitation and competition. Student literature of the period is very 'samey' partly because education itself was not very diversified—grammar school curricula were almost all the same, and the undergraduate degree was a general arts digest, studied by almost everyone, in Latin. This culture could develop some dangerous edges—the possibility of epigram sliding into libel is one we have seen a number of times. And an air of student competitiveness also generated a kind of poetry which can be almost bullying: identifying bad poets and lampooning their bad poems. The title of my survey is taken from a slightly later Oxford collection of poetry, *Naps Upon Parnassus* (London, 'printed by express order from the wits', 1658). It is subtitled 'A sleepy Muse nipt and pincht, though not awakened. Such Voluntary and Jovial Copies of Verses, as were lately receiv'd from some of the Wits of the Universities, in a Frolick'. The 'sleepy muse' was the unfortunate Samuel Austin of Wadham College. Austin fancied himself as a poet, and circulated some rather obscure satires. Several students, including Thomas Flatman of New College, got hold of these poems, and decided to publish them in a mock-edition, with fake

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[8] *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Oxford, 1621), p. 38.

prefaces and notes and their own commendatory poems, rather like *Coryats Crudities* mentioned earlier. As Flatman ironically hymned the poor poetaster of Wadham College:

> What *Stereopegeterick* Poetry!
> What Hieroglypick words? What Riddles? all
> In Letters more then *Cabalisticall . . .*[9]

Thomas Flatman, *Poems and Songs*, 4th edn. (London, 1686), New College Library, Oxford, BT3.173.18, frontispiece

This takes us right back to the nonsense verses by John Hoskins, which were entitled 'Cabalisticall verses'. Nonsense poetry, then, is one other queer edge of this literary culture. A final one is the so-called 'metaphysical' verse of John Donne and his school, who were all university men (or boys), and who. After moving to the metropolis, indulged in a kind of 'conceited' writing based on exactly the 'equivocation and allusion, often sustained over long exchanges' I identified above. The added twist here, I think, is not often noted, namely that metaphysical poetry of Donne's stamp also often depends on the same culture of exploiting logical fallacy that underpinned Zouche's *Fallacy/The Sophister*. In this connection it is salutary to recall one of the earliest references we have to metaphysical poetry in English, one made by the Scottish poet William Drummond of Hawthornden: 'In vain have some Men of late (Transformers of every Thing) consulted upon her

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[9] *Naps Upon Parnassus* (London, 1658), sig. B2r.

[poetry's] Reformation, and endeavoured to abstract her to Metaphysical Ideas and Scholastical Quiddities'.[10] Most critics seize upon 'Metaphysical Ideas' and neglect 'Scholastical Quiddities'. But together they evoke a world of scholastic logic and metaphysics, 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 written humour as epigram looks like Martial, as satire like Juvenal, as comedy like Plautus, and so forth. One seeming, but only seeming, exception to the rule is the 'jest book'.[11] 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 *Modius salium* ('a pinch of salt'). It was a manuscript collection of 'such Pieces of Humour, as prevail'd at Oxford in the Time of Mr. Anthony à Wood', i.e. the great Restoration antiquary of Oxford. It was printed from Wood's own manuscript collection of jokes of that title. It contains a few older, fairly literary epigrams on New College figures, notably on the Elizabethan-Jacobean 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 School.) 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 left the college in 1625 to the comfortable life of the vicarage of Chesterton and rectorship of Shipton-upon-Cherwell. In Wood's time, two generations later, anecdotes about him were evidently still being told.

But they seem remarkably unfunny:

> A Scholar, lock'd out of his Gates at College, desir'd his Friend within to get him the Keys. His Friend, Mr. *Phil. French* of New College, answers, *Sir you were better come in and speak your self, for I think I shall scarce procure them.*

> Mr. *Phil. French* of New College coming into the Kitchen, chose out of the Eggs in the Skillet all the *swimming* Eggs for his own Dinner, which are commonly the *worst*; but being ask'd why he did so, answer'd, *I know these to be Duck Eggs, by their* swimming.

> Mr. *Phil. French*, when he had got an upper Chamber in New College (for which they attend long sometimes) became so fond and proud of it that when he fell out with his Taylor, Shoemaker, Barber, &c. swore *that he would kick them down Stairs* wheresoever *he met them*.[13]

Note the air of deliberately exploited logical fallacy once again. That because ducks swim duck eggs also swim is, for instance, what students would immediately recognise as the 'fallacy of accident', described by commentators at the time as 'the first and worst of all the fallacies'. The first and third jests seem to work on a kind of weird spatial fallacy: that one can be on both sides

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of a door at once, that one's up-down domestic geography can be transplanted onto the level street.

They also sound completely contrived: Why would French choose bad eggs? What would he be doing waiting by the college gate after curfew, on the *inside*? And the last joke was seemingly but implausibly told at least three times in the same way, to his 'Taylor, Shoemaker, Barber, &c.'. Evidently anecdotes of this type gathered around French, who may well have said none of them— Wood was writing this all down much later. They are once again 'insider' acts: they all only work in a collegiate sociality, where there are forbidding gates, communal meals, hierarchies of dormitories, and the like. Such humour rises and falls with such communities. It hasn't gone away, especially the performative element, or at least not too long ago;[14] but what has perhaps changed most of all is the 'sphere of operation' of humour. What most people, now including most younger people, find funny today is usually drawn from a much wider culture, a kind of equivalent to the 'public sphere', driven by media, but for the purposes of laughter. And when our much wider public sphere, now more national and international than local or collegiate, electronic over material, starts to grow suspicious of smaller communities, and starts to police harder what we are allowed to find funny, then these older forms, almost closed-cult phenomena, will inevitably cheapen, tarnish, and fade.

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[14] One of my undergraduate tutors, the late lamented A. D. Nuttall, liked to tell stories in tutorials of his student days in Merton College in the late '50s, where he first teamed up with the late lamented Stephen Metcalf—whose name became a constant anecdotal presence in our tutorials in the '90s. E.g. Nuttall: 'When Metcalf and I were at Merton we went to some drinks, and Metcalf started sticking small pins into me. "Why are you sticking small pins into Nuttall, Metcalf?", I asked. "Because back in college I have a *small wax effigy of you* which I am endeavouring to harm".' Can this have happened?