

Jonathan swift and
john donne:
balancing the
extremes of
renaissance england



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The renaissance that spread through Europe, while effectively marking the transformation from medieval traditionalism to modern pragmatism, brought a plethora of new and old ideas into conflict with each other. From the enlightenment born of the Renaissance came new interests in logic, reason, science, individuality, and humanity. These characteristics often clashed with the staid traditionalism of old-world religion and superstition. But this period cannot accurately be characterized as a conflict between science and religion. With the sudden influx of new ideas to complicate life, ideas rooted in seemingly conflicting forms of rationality and religion each had vastly divergent characteristics. The timeless conflict of religion, namely between different branches of Christianity, sparked unspeakable bloodshed and hatred. Similarly, science and reason became buzzwords that were frequently misused by people who indulged in nothing more than their imagination, hoping it would pass for some form of creative logic. In a way, these divergences of thought produced, to the more sensible members of society, a clear polarization of those who pursued truth and those who simply made silly attempts to create it. As a result, humorous stories rife with sarcasm and subtle ridicule became a popular literary device for writers of the time. Their satires attempted to bring a true rationality to a time full of confusion that passed as clarity. Jonathan Swift's Tale of a Tub satirizes the attempts of the time to apply reason and logic to selecting the one "true" religion. At the time, sects of Christianity such as Catholics, Lutherans, Protestants, and Calvinists came into bitter conflict with each other. Each one claimed that it was the only true path towards salvation. The hostilities between these various Christians inspired a number of people to engage logic and reason to promote the "truth" of their religion. In the section of <https://assignbuster.com/jonathan-swift-and-john-donne-balancing-the-extremes-of-renaissance-england/>

Tale of a Tub entitled, " digression concerning the original, the use, and improvement of madness in a commonwealth," Swift attacks the brand of " rationality" used by many people involved in these debates by holding up for ridicule the absurdity of their style of bringing the most mysterious elements of ourselves and our world into focus with imaginative but impossibly simple explanations. John Donne's Satire III is similarly grounded in the futility of allowing people's limited capacity for knowledge and understanding to determine the truth behind God. But Donne's shorter poem gets more directly to the point of Christian fundamentalism. Rather than that go to lengthy satirical explanation of how silly certain rationalists can be, he makes quick, simple work of denouncing the Churches of Europe that he thinks undermine the most basic principals of Christianity. Together, these selections from Donne and Swift complement each other by bringing into focus the relationship between futile arguments concerning the truths of religion and the hopelessly faulty reason and logic that spewed from quack scientists and rationalists. Jonathan Swift's narrator in his satire, Tale of a Tub represents the arbitrary, non-linear, and excessively imaginative trend of certain " thinkers" that helped shape the wildly conflicting philosophies of the late 17th century. This character tries to weave together the legitimately philosophical views of other characters in The Tale, each representing a conflicting view of Christianity (Abrams, 2312). As a result, this narrator is the target of his satire, and through his numerous digressions throughout the piece, demonstrates the wide disparity between those who grounded their opinions with rationality and evidence and those who used this time of innovative thinking to indulge in uncontrolled ejaculations of thought. In the section titled " A Digression Concerning the Original, the Use, and

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Improvement of Madness in a Commonwealth," the narrator spews forth a profoundly convoluted series of paradoxes. In long winded fashion, the narrator accuses certain profound "thinkers" of his time and times before of conjecturing outlandish opinions and theories that have no basis in reality. He accuses early scientists such as Epicurus of conjuring the idea that the universe is made from the attraction of atoms. As it turns out, he Epicurus was not far off, but the narrator of course, implies that a similar miracle would be necessary to take him seriously (Swift, 2315). And yet, his thoroughly explained reason for this trend smacks of the very same illogic that he seeks to denounce. In an attempt to bring forth a pseudo-scientific explanation for the inconsistencies of modern thought, the narrator describes a kind of vapor that wafts from the "lower faculties" (Swift, 2313) of men, and infects the brain with the disease of irrationality. Although he uses the surprisingly accurate metaphor of the process through which a thunderstorm is formed, his analogy seeks scientific merit where there clearly is none. According to the narrator, Man is, in its natural state, docile and unlikely to produce distinguished thought, much like a clear sky. But like moisture in the soil that eventually works its way up to the sky to form rain clouds, vapors ascend from the "lower faculties" of men, forming thunderstorms of thought that have varying results depending on the vapor's source (Swift 2313). The narrator turns to the example of Henry IV, who inexplicably summoned a frighteningly powerful military presence that stood poised for a battle or conquest that nobody saw the need for. The narrator describes, in true satirical fashion, how a "surgeon", curious as to the cause of Henry's actions, drove a spike into his head to prove his hunch that mind-altering vapors would escape, "accidentally" killing him in the process (Swift <https://assignbuster.com/jonathan-swift-and-john-donne-balancing-the-extremes-of-renaissance-england/>)

2313). Indeed, vapors did escape, and from this clearly contrived story, the narrator professes a wholly improbable theory. According to the narrator, Henry was in pursuit of the princess de Conde, who was relocated by her husband to the Spanish Netherlands. The prince, in desperation, and unable to find “relief” for his stoked sexual urges, falls victim to the dreaded vapors. The narrator speculates that unspent semen, “raised and inflamed” (Swift, 2313) combusted and was converted into a pure form of anger or irritability. They ascended through the body via the spinal “duct,” and poisoned the brain. Naturally, Henry was then driven to delusions of a need to pursue and conquer; and so his vast armies were born. Although this attempt to rationalize a series of obviously coincidental events is a laughable excuse for science, it does represent a perfectly valid, creative, and colorful metaphor. Perhaps Henry’s insecurity after his failed pursuit of the princess Conde drove him to obsess over other forms of conquer. But Swift’s point is clear. By making his narrator’s scientific reasoning so preposterous, he brings into focus the misconception that the world’s peculiar events can be explained away in terms no larger than the scale or scope of men. Swift even allows his narrator to make this very point. “For what man, in the natural state or course of thinking, did ever conceive it in his power to reduce the notions of all mankind exactly to the same length, and breadth, and height of his own” (Swift, 2314)? And so the hypocrisy and paradoxes continue. In the same way that Swifts mocks those like his narrator who manufacture truth out of conjecture, Donne’s Satire III questions people’s ability to decide what is and is not religious truth. Donne seems embittered by the closed mindedness of various forms of religion and rationality. To attack their methods, he uses the characters Mirreus, Crantz, Graius, Phrygius, and <https://assignbuster.com/jonathan-swift-and-john-donne-balancing-the-extremes-of-renaissance-england/>

Graccus to represent Roman Catholics, Calvinists, the Church of England, skeptics, and relativists respectively (Abrams, 1258). He accuses Mirreus of fleeing England for Rome where she can revel in her ancient traditions (Donne, 1258, 43). He implies that Crantz is utterly free of character, passion, love, or anything other than religious allegiances prescribed by the state (Donne, 1259, 48). Phrygius, the skeptic, denounces all religion because of his discontent with only one (Donne, 1259, 62). Meanwhile Graccus, the relativist, is so blinded by his acceptance of all truths, he does not see fit to at least pursue a deeper understanding of truth (Donne, 1259, 65). Each of these characters are stuck in their ways, unwilling, or unable to accept the infinite possibilities of themselves and the world they live in. Worse, they are all self-promoting, insistent upon their way as the only true way. They, namely those representing various religions, seek to impose upon others their version of the truth. But Donne understands that truth is not a universal constant. One of the most fundamental characteristics of the renaissance is the resurgence of humanity as a worthwhile subject of praise rather than scorn. Accepting differences and individuality were taken more seriously than before. Donne makes clear his belief that people should be free to choose for themselves what they believe to be religious truth. This plays on the idea that truth is not easily defined; that people do not have the capacity to discover truth in its entirety. As a result, people must engage in an intimate dialogue with their own hearts, affording themselves the freedom to move towards the religion that most effectively speaks to them. Donne makes this opinion clear saying, Be busy to seek her¹, believe me this, He's not of non, nore worst, that seeks the best. To stand inquiring right, is not to stray; (Donne, 1259, 74) Donne goes on to use the imagery of <https://assignbuster.com/jonathan-swift-and-john-donne-balancing-the-extremes-of-renaissance-england/>

a craggy mountain whose summit represents the personal achievement of religious truth (Donne, 1259, 80). The path to the summit is arduous and difficult, having no straight, easy paths; paths that the Catholics, Calvinists, etc. attempt to create. By viewing one of the foremost conflicts of the 17th century with Donne's Satire III and understanding the Narrator's character in Swift's Tale of a Tub, we can begin to understand the method behind the madness that helped create such a quagmire of religious conflict. Donne encourages those who lack conviction to explore the infinite possibilities of spirituality, and decide for themselves, and only themselves, their true path to religious truth. He questions the process by which people arrive at their interpretation of religious truth with such conviction that they feel it their place to impose it upon others. Those who do so have reduced truth to "exactly to the same length, and breadth, and height of [there] own" (Swift, 2314), as Swift's narrator states, while elevating themselves to a level of perceived understanding that rivals God's. And they arrive at these conclusions through similar processes satirized by Swift's narrator. Donne implies that Mirreus, Crantz, and Graius give up their quest for truth in favor of an easier path, prescribed by their fathers or imposed by their community. They suffer a similar intellectual weakness to Swift's narrator, as they choose not to employ their unique power to actively seek truth through knowledge, relying instead on basic impulses, broken logic, and partial ignorance. Even more similar to Swift's narrator is Graccus, the relativist, who believes every religion represents truth, and that truth is so undefinable, we may simply create our own. Thomas Sloan, author of the article, "The persona as Rhetor: An Interpretation of Donne's Satyre III," best describes the folly of the relativists's ways, saying that if we are "allowed to fashion our own <https://assignbuster.com/jonathan-swift-and-john-donne-balancing-the-extremes-of-renaissance-england/>

reasons, we give up the search for truth and willingly turn our paths into 'easy ways'" (Sloan, 109). Just as Swift's narrator indulges in the fanciful creation of his own truths, so do relativists avoid the complicated, conflicting, and often frustrating task of seeking truth. With these passages Donne draws a fine line between the notion of a universal truth that is accessible to all, and an undefinable truth that differs with each person. Throughout Satire III, Donne touches upon the idea that some people, namely those who fiercely defend their religion and punish those who do not conform, are guilty of the very idolatry for which they persecute others. By believing that they are capable of fashioning an interpretation of proper religious worship in terms no greater than the depth and scope of humanity, they, . . . More choose men's unjust Power from God claimed, than God himself to trust (Donne, 1260, 109) This final line of the poem represents the culmination of his argument that men should not presume themselves capable of knowing the truth in its entirety. At the same time, however, Donne does not support the idea that people should reduce themselves to a state of shrug-shouldered bewilderment or unchecked fantasy characterized by Swift's narrator. Only through the honest pursuit of truth, based in reality, can one come to a legitimate conclusion about their religious convictions. Even then, the limitations of humanity can never claim to understand truth to its fullest. And so these authors paint two unique pictures that, by demonstrating the extremes of thought, draw a path of moderation towards the lofty goals for humanity that gathered its initial momentum during the European Renaissance. Many used rationalism, logic, and reason to give cold explanations to extraordinary things, offering a world defined by science.

Others reveled in fantastical discharges of "reasoning" compiled completely <https://assignbuster.com/jonathan-swift-and-john-donne-balancing-the-extremes-of-renaissance-england/>

without proper evidence or consideration. And still others remained steeped in the traditions of old. Yet even the most ardent rationalist failed to define true reasonability. Donne and Swift offer detailed descriptions of either side, and in doing so, imply that the area between represents true rationality. They suggest that a truly reasonable person takes into account the dynamic interplay of humanity, the mysteries of spirituality, and the resources of logic, reason, and knowledge to form a system of beliefs grounded in an honest compilation of understanding without the self-imposed limitations of obstinacy. This kind of balance, although it still struggles to take hold even today, owes much of its beginnings to the writers and satirists like Swift and Donne.

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