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“Nice Opinion—God of Fools”: Drummond of Hawthornden and Folly

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William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649) in the early nineteen-seventies account of Robert H. MacDonald (and previous Scottish critics) emerged, with some justice, as a very assiduous literary borrower. MacDonald wrote, “But even in an age that saw much ‘pilfering’, when the practice of imitation was generous however ambiguous the theory, the scale of Drummond’s plunder was exceptionally ambitious” (*Library*, p. 24). This judgement has been nuanced in recent years to acknowledge Drummond’s own poetic voice and his deeper understanding of poetic genre. For example, David Atkinson identifies an attractive directness in the religious poetry, while noting “creative tension” (p. 190) as Drummond mediated between the competing Catholic and Protestant theological traditions from which he took his sentiment and imagery. And Michael Spiller (“Quintessencing”) has shown the painstaking creativity with which Drummond expanded his poetic output, reordering poems to create a first collection (1616) as the distillation of a Petrarchan sequence. This young man, who kept an assiduous record of the plays he watched while he was supposedly studying law in Bourges, has also emerged as a uniquely valuable witness to individual dramatic spectatorship in the period.¹

1 See McGavin, “Spectatorship”. Drummond was not the only such commentator, but his account is extensive and distinctively Scottish in its describing European rather than English drama. For English responses to English theatre, see Whitney.

But the problem won't go away: Drummond's creativity and derivative-ness co-existed deeply entwined; for him, imitation did not simply lead to invention but continued to constrain it; his most unique contribution to culture lay in the secondary activity of recording spectatorship, creatively insightful about others' creations, but dependent on them. A prolific reader of radical contemporary drama, kind host of Ben Jonson and *amanuensis* for Jonson's vinously opinionated comments on his fellow writers, Drummond did not himself write plays. Instead, he contributed to the most externally constrained of theatrical genres, in which a deep knowledge of contemporary taste could work with traditional structure to serve defined, prearranged ends: he wrote, that is, for the royal entries into Edinburgh of James I in 1617 and Charles I in 1633.² Similarly, in later life he turned to history, a genre in which his imagination, scholarship and poetic sensibility could give new life to received narratives through re-writing or, indeed, translation.³

One might not think such confined creativity especially distinctive of the early seventeenth century—it's a pattern we can all recognise—but Drummond was (and remains) a significant enough figure in Scottish culture to deserve special examination. This was a man with a continental education and international tastes who remained resident in Scotland to oversee the family estates after the death of his father; valued by major figures in the Jacobean and Caroline court, but in the end honoured by his local civic neighbours rather than by the monarchs he praised and whose domestic tragedies he deplored;⁴ a member of the gentry class deeply concerned with elite values but forced to express them through elegant correspondence rather than day-to-day engagement with those at court. For example, he corresponded with Sir Robert Ker of Ancram, gentleman of the bedchamber of King Charles I, consoled him during his temporary exile from the court of King James, knew of Ker's relations with John Donne and Samuel Daniel, and acquired at least one important literary manuscript which represented this link.⁵ He remained a large fish in a small pool. Drummond is

2 See Drummond, *Poems and Prose*, pp. 83–87 (“Forth Feasting”) and 133–35 (“The Entertainment of the High and Mighty Monarch . . . 15 June 1633”).

3 See, e.g., his *History of Scotland from the Year 1423 until the Year 1542*, published as *The History of the Lives and Reigns of the Five James's, Kings of Scotland*, in Drummond, *Works*, pp. 1–116. See also Rae.

4 Drummond records his burgessships, awarded by Haddington, Edinburgh, Canongate and Linlithgow, in his journal (Drummond, *Poems and Prose*, pp. 193–94).

5 See his letter of 7 June 1621 to Sir Robert Ker, in which he refers to an imperfect copy of Samuel Daniel's *Hymen's Triumph*, the masque performed at the wedding of Lady Roxburgh. He donated

almost emblematic of the cultural fault-lines which occurred when James left to rule both Scotland and England from the south. But I think there is a deeper paradox of *mentalité* in Drummond, which coincides with these circumstances. (I can't say that it was *caused* by them, for, having met literary figures face-to-face in London, he does not seem to have resented the life of a rural gentleman after his father's death, and he knew the classical models which validated such a life.⁶)

The paradox in Drummond's outlook which drove both his creative output and its limitations can be better understood if we explore it through the notion of folly and what folly might have meant for him. But to do this, one has to look at his work obliquely. For example, Drummond was content to exhibit folly where genre dignified the performance. One sees this in his "Encomiastike Verses before a book entitled *Follies*". Here, he rather obviously signals his knowledge of Erasmus in the opening two lines ("At ease I red your Worke, and am right sorrye / It came not forth before *Encomium Morie*") to prevent the reader misconstruing the performed folly of his rhymes, which link "bonnets" and "sonnetes", "Tartares" and "gartares", and in a way which Byron would later match in finding a rhyme for "Kentucky", Drummond links the most influential poet of the times, "Torquato Tasso", with "pecorious asse, ho!"⁷ If, on the other hand, one wishes to explore Drummond's more private concern with folly, particularly revealing is a group of humorous stories which Drummond copied down in his *Miscellanies*, the same volumes in which he excerpted many passages from contemporary English and continental drama, around the years 1609 to 1612.⁸

A Butcher's son being appointed to deliver a speech for some of the little towns of France, at the approach of Henry IV, being dasht [abashed], repeated sundry times, "Je suis ... Je suis ...". "Et que diable est [*sic*] vous?" said the king. He replied, "le boucheur de la ville, Sire, et voici mes brebis!"⁹

this to the town "college", now Edinburgh University, where it is among the Laing papers as EUL De.3.69. For the letter, see Ker Family, Marquis of Lothian: "Letter of William Drummond of Hawthornden to Sir Robert Ker, Earl of Ancram", National Records of Scotland, GD40/2/13/26. For evidence of his correspondence during Ker's exile on the continent, see McGavin, "Thomas Ker".

6 Spiller, "Drummond, William, of Hawthornden".

7 Drummond, *Poems and Prose*, pp. 140-41. Byron's rhyme was "... buck, he" (*Don Juan*, Canto VIII, stanza 61).

8 The anecdotes are from Hawthornden MSS, vol. VIII, Drummond *Miscellanies*, NLS MS 2060, fols. 19^v and 37^v. I have modernised the text of the anecdotes.

9 I have here conflated two versions of the joke which Drummond copied down on fols. 19^v and 37^v.

The Prince of Condé, entering Rouen: when an advocate had begun his speech “Hannibal ce Grand Guerrier . . . ”, and stammered, the prince (being without boots and a shower falling) said, “Hannibal était boté [*sic*]; je ne suis pas! Aduançons!”

Queen Elizabeth entering Bristol, a speech was to be delivered to her. The honest man began, “May it please your sacred Majesty, I am the mouth of this Town.” And then, all amazed, forgot the rest. She spying, said once or twice, “Speak, good mouth!”

The theatrically knowledgeable Drummond took great pleasure in *any* blurring of the boundary between the play world and the real world, but these comic anecdotes form a subcategory about a kind of folly which evidently delighted him. They record moments when a lack of social confidence revealed itself in the disruption of public theatricality—as if playing one’s part socially and playing a part in theatre were two sides of the same coin. An honest man, an advocate, a butcher, all stammer or are amazed and forget everything they have learned when confronted with royalty or aristocracy. The butcher falls out of the fiction back into reality; the advocate fails to sustain the fiction, so that his audience becomes pressingly aware of reality; and the man who is overwhelmed by the reality of the queen’s presence is humorously reminded by her of the fiction which should be dominant in his mind. These are jokes about performances which could not be sustained when they were overwhelmed by the realities of the social drama. The world of theatrical performance is here in an abrasive relationship with the performative constraints of a dramaturgical society.¹⁰ Folly, together with its embarrassing and memorable humiliations, is the consequence.

But, as so often with humour, delight is not the end of the matter. The shame of public exposure seems to lie at the root of these anecdotes, revealing a deep psychological association for Drummond between scripted theatricality and social behaviour. Here one confronts the ambivalence of folly: that what we delight in and what we fear may be the same, and what we condemn in others may be what we are most anxious about in ourselves. This truth received wonderful theatrical expression in the recent production by Greg Walker and Tom Betteridge of David Lyndsay’s *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, when the Hat of Folly was put on various heads and spectators laughed while still anxious that it might be passed to themselves (which was of course the fundamental message

10 The term “dramaturgical” as applied to society comes from social geography. For further discussion of its relevance to Scotland, see McGavin, *Theatricality*.

of the episode).¹¹ The surface structure of the comic anecdotes displays an élite patronising pleasure in the incapacity of others below Drummond's own gentry level to subdue their sense of social inferiority: Drummond is the spectator looking on and enjoying others' discomfiture. Whether or not Drummond, seasoned spectator and gentleman, was sufficiently imaginative to consider the relationship in reverse, to see himself as the potential object of others' spectatorship (and I believe he was), the stories still imply an anxiety on Drummond's part about sustaining the social performance, and sensitivity towards the opinions of those who might be looking on, judging him along with the rest of us as we try to do our best on this great stage of fools, or "Maze of fooles", as Drummond termed it in his contribution to the Entry of Charles (*Poems and Prose*, p. 134, l. 33).

However, we *do* have evidence that Drummond was aware of the complex issues surrounding folly, both as it might be found in other people and as it might be imputed by other people to oneself. We have it locally from his reading of Marston's *Parasitaster*.¹² I would claim that we also have it in his self-educational programme of intensive reading and excerpting from contemporary plays. But it can also be argued that Drummond's awareness of folly shows itself ultimately in the very limitations of his artistic achievement.

Parasitaster or *The Fawn*, by John Marston, was published in 1606, and read by Drummond in 1609.¹³ He took substantially more excerpts for his *Miscellany* volume from this play than any other, and even included extracts from Marston's Preface to the edition. *Prima facie*, the play seems to counsel a kind of ethical egocentricity, in that it emphasises self-knowledge. The Preface and Drummond's excerpting open with Seneca's warning in *Thyestes* against dying well-known to others but ignorant of oneself: "Qui nimis notus omnibus ignotus moritur sibi". Self-knowledge appears to be the driving force of the play: the Duke of Ferrara's

11 This performance and discussion relating to it are available at <<http://www.stagingthescottish-court.org>> (accessed 1 March 2014).

12 Drummond's extracts from Marston's *Parasitaster* or *The Fawn* are found in Hawthornden MSS, vol. VII, Drummond Miscellanies, NLS MS 2059, fols. 344^r-48^v.

13 This is attested by Hawthornden MSS, vol. VII, *Drummond Miscellanies*, NLS MS 2059, fol. 361^r, where it is listed with the other English play texts in the same order as they are extracted in the body of the volume. One of the extracts suggests that Drummond was using the second Quarto; he followed the Q2 compositor's misunderstanding of Marston's wishes at V.i.207: Q2: "lou'de of him"; Drummond: "lou'd of him"; Q1: "lou'de of Her". The second quarto was printed in the same year as the first (1606), and was Marston's corrected text. The volume is still in Edinburgh University Library. Quotations from Marston's *Parasitaster* are taken from Blostein, ed.

eventual recognition of his own folly in seeking a younger wife is what legitimises his exposure of folly in others. It gives credibility to his final role as pageant master creating a pageant in which Folly (as part of a remarkable group including War, Laughter, and Beggary) follows after Cupid (V.i.150). Self-knowledge authorises him to be the agent of Marston's desire to generalise folly to include the pageant's fictional courtly spectators, and by implication all who watch the play. This is a move reminiscent of what Lyndsay had done sixty years earlier in the final scene of the *Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, and it is described by Marston's duke of Urbino, Gonzago, as a "parliament" (V.i.474), though it lacks Lyndsay's political bite, remaining at the level of élite self-criticism—which is not very far from élite self-congratulation: the sensations of wry acknowledgement or genuine repentance can themselves be enjoyed and credited to one's courtly status. The Duke asks of his neighbour from Urbino, "What, grave Urbin's duke? Dares Folly's sceptre touch his prudent shoulders?" (V.i.437-38). One can imagine the unspoken reply, "Alas, yes; but I'm still the duke!"

More fundamentally, however, self-knowledge in *Parasitaster* is paradoxically attentive to the opinions of others, anxious about them even as it tries to marginalise them, in just the way I have suggested is evident in Drummond's comic anecdotes about artistic failure coming from social inadequacy. Drummond extracts from the Preface Marston's lines, "since other mens tongues ar not vith in my teeth vhy / should I hope to gouerne them" (corresponds to Blostein, ed., "To My Equal Reader", p. 69, ll. 34-35). In context, Marston is acknowledging that it lies beyond one's powers to control *malicious* detraction, but Drummond's first extract from the play proper is of a broader sentiment which places responsibility back on the individual, regardless of the motives of others: "Honor auoids not onlie iust defame / but flies all meanes that may il voice his name" (corresponds to Blostein, ed., I.i.15-16). One should avoid doing anything that *might* attract criticism, not just those things that would justly draw it on oneself. In this case, the Duke of Ferrara's brother, Renaldo, is commenting on the Duke's decision to leave his dukedom in the care of the brother while he visits Urbino, but Renaldo's more sweeping advice to be cautious reveals the weight of social constraint which bears upon the élite of society. It appears that there are many who would take the opportunity to place Folly's hat upon one's head and anyone with a sense of honour will avoid such occasions. In the event, the duke refuses to alter his desire despite the risk that some will criticise him for lightness or triviality. His life will not be "forced" and "tugged along" "and all to keep

[placate] the god of fools and women, Nice Opinion” (corresponds to Blostein, ed., I.i.57-60). Drummond excerpts this line from a number which express similar sentiments. Of course, the problem with such excerpts is that it is hard to see how much of the original context was working in the excerpter’s mind when he chose the passage, and how much would have remained when he revisited it. There are many places where one feels that Drummond took a *bon mot* from a play for his collection or, indeed, deleted one he had previously taken, without thought to its theatrical context, saving it for possible use in other contexts. This particular case also has an element of ambiguity. He writes “an old man” in the margin, thus appearing to limit the sentiment to such a character. This respects the original play, for the Duke is indeed an older man seeking to break out of the austere constraints thought suitable to his age. But it is not certain that Drummond saw this expression as applying *only* to an old man. Indeed, the excerpts which precede and follow this one make more obvious reference to age, and the marginal comment may have been intended to apply as much to them. More suggestively, Drummond’s manuscript rendering suggests that he is taking the sentiment out of its context and seeing it as a general definition: when copying out “To keep the God of fooles and vomen Nice opinion”, he underlines the “God of fools” bit, leaving himself with a definition of “nice opinion”.

So what *exactly* do fools (and, in Drummond’s casually fashionable misogyny, “women”) have as their god? The word “nice” had so many possible meanings in the early seventeenth century that it functioned as a generalised value term, taking its substantive meaning from the precise context in which it was used. The context here suggests that Marston, like other satirists of the period, understood “nice opinion” as, in Blostein’s phrase, “the uninformed judgement of the multitude” (n. to I.i.59). And this is where we confront the paradox in Drummond, and indeed a paradox in folly. If uninformed opinion is the god of fools, it is rightly to be despised, and one should not care about what such fools say. But this indifference can only be earned by caring enough about opinion to educate oneself to proper information. Fools are at once ill-informed and also too ready to value the current ill-informed opinion, but one cannot wholly ignore them: one has to make oneself better informed and, as Renaldo said to his brother, one has to avoid giving an opportunity for criticism. As a social player living under the spectatorship of the world, and subject to the judgements of others, one cannot in the end control these judgements. However, one can act to reduce the likelihood that one will be *justly* accused of folly or, equally horrid,

be accused of folly by those whom one respects. It is apparently a sign of folly to make ill-informed opinion into your god, but, at the same time, it would be folly not to be mindful of opinion's force and to do all one could to avoid acquiring a bad reputation. Just as in the revealing anecdotes which showed Drummond's delight at inferiors who proved unable to sustain a public performance because of the overwhelming effect of social reality, opinion is here a cause of both contempt and concern. Because of the spectatorship of society, folly is thus the great "object" of the young seventeenth-century nobleman: hidden behind the surrogate enemy of "nice opinion", diverted from the self by misogyny or class comedy, constrained by pithy formulations and naturalised by a hundred years of literary tradition, folly is still the abiding horror to which one obsessively returns and in which one finds a kind of playful joy. It is the obverse of a performative, dramaturgical society—however much one despises ignorant criticism, one does not wish to be thought to play the fool on the great stage of life. And Drummond did what he could to acquire the knowledge to avoid this possibility, at the same time shielding himself from the fact that he was trying to do so.

Drummond's self-educative programme of selecting extracts from the plays he read was one means of avoiding the imputation of folly. They evidently helped to give him those current parameters of taste and judgement which would ensure that he could sustain his cultural performance for those élite whose opinions were not "nice", and also acquire a status to protect him from those who were less knowledgeable. He hoovered up what was current in poetry and might be used again: metaphors, similes, insults, set-piece descriptions, imagery. He looked also for the structures of witty thought: antitheses, sarcasm, ripostes which might help him shape his conversation, even if politeness would not permit their re-use, for example, "I shal loose my vits. R be comforted 3ow ha non to leyse" (corresponds to Blostein, ed., II.i.413-14).¹⁴ Elegant phrasing, *sententiae*, definitions of character "types" were all helping to shape Drummond's mental world to a pattern satisfactorily established by existing literary models. In a rare moment of explicit self-revelation, he actually comments "excellent" in the margin against the following extract: "Vertue and Visdome ar not fortunes gifts therefore / those yat fortune can not make vertuous, sche / comonlie makith rich" (corresponds to Blostein, ed., IV.i.608-10)—this is well shaped,

14 The "R" here probably stands for "reply" or "riposte" or some such word.

witty, re-useable, and, of course, comforting for a gentleman who did not have the wealth to inhabit court circles. It is also *originally* Montaigne's.

The extracts most obviously aimed at sustaining future social performance are those which Drummond identified as “compliment”. He could even alter the original so as to record the compliment in the form it might have if he were actually to use it, as in: “I and al my fortunes ar deuoted I protest most relligiouslie to your se[lf]rvice. I vow my awne selfe onlie proud in being acknowledged of 3ow”. The original in Marston (Blostein, ed., III.i.316-18) was less smooth, included reference to “my family”, which would have been inappropriate in Drummond's situation, and the speaker went on to describe himself as the other's “creature”—evidently a step too far for Drummond. Trivial, artificial and insincere though this attention to compliment may seem to us, it would have been an important pressure point in forming gentlemanly relations, and getting it wrong might damage one with the reputation of folly. (Shakespeare uses it in this way more than once.¹⁵) We can on occasion see the consequences of this early training in practice. Compare, for example, the shape of his address to Sir Robert Ker in the 7 June 1621 letter referred to above—“forgiue my Long Silence, Which was not caused by forgetfulnesse of what I am owne, but by respect. for in these busye tymes I thought in your behalfe from mee a tedious importunitye a greater wrong than respectiue silence”—with this 1609 extract from Thomas Middleton's *A Mad World, My Masters*: “In this forgiue me for that being a stranger / to 3ow I make my vay so bold and presume / rather vpon 3our kindnes then 3our knowledg”.¹⁶

So far I have presented Drummond's programme of excerpting in a rather instrumentalist way: a deliberate banking of other people's material so as to sustain one's own cultural performance—and it *was* that. In terms of UK Higher Education, Drummond would provide the ideal evidence that one's creative work had had an “impact”. In this respect, Drummond offers a pragmatic secular parallel to the “protestant aesthetic” of drawing benefit from idolatrous theatre.¹⁷ But one could also argue that his derivativeness answered a more ethical imperative: after all, how does one know oneself as a social being except by acquiring a wide range of perspectives from others, learning how the world is

15 See, e.g., Agamemnon's irritated response that Aeneas, who has apparently failed to recognise him, is either scorning the Greeks or is a most ceremonious courtier (*Tro.*, I.iii.233-34).

16 Hawthornden MSS, vol. VII, *Drummond Miscellanies*, NLS MS 2059, fol. 22r.

17 See, e.g., Diehl.

seen by others and trying to see it through their eyes? Self-knowledge, which is the ideal, is dependent on an imaginative appreciation of how others view oneself. A spectator of others, one must also acknowledge oneself as the spectacle, and try to view with the audience's eyes. Attentiveness to opinion, with all the constraints on action that such a process may bring, and with all the emotional turmoil that may attend it, is still an unavoidable route to wisdom. Getting the balance right is the challenge.

It is no accident that Drummond was at once a uniquely valuable witness to early modern spectatorship, an excerpter of drama, a voracious reader of continental plays and poems, but himself worked only in predictable theatrical modes, was a “silver” poet who aimed at established models, and who attempted to mediate between the literary languages he had received from the competing Protestant and Catholic religious traditions. He had the outlook of a creator who was also a social being aware of others looking at him, just as he was of looking at them; of someone whose retiring from the highest levels of public life gave him local affirmations of his worth in the various burgesships he received from Edinburgh and elsewhere, while permitting him also to view the highest honours as things not to be aimed at or even worth enjoying; someone whose country seat permitted him to avoid the more obvious dangers of committing social folly under a courtly gaze but at the same time did not let him escape the paradox of needing to know others' opinions in order to avoid such an accusation. This mentality prevented him from travelling the dangerous ground that goes with major creativity. He could not enter the realm of Milton, for example, though Milton knew and used Drummond's work for his own more radical individualistic purposes.¹⁸ But, in an age when the motto *casus ab alto gravior* (“a fall from a height is more severe”) had currency, perhaps Drummond's secondary achievements are testimony to what he would have regarded as a deeper ethical achievement—that he knew himself, and, even if he did not rise to the heights, he did not descend to folly. He managed, *though at a cost*, to sustain his cultural credibility and avoid falling victim to “Nice opinion”, the “God of fooles”.

18 See Corns, p. 227.

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