

1978

Tobias Smollett's Satiric Spokesman in Humphry Clinker

Sophia Andres

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Andres, Sophia (1978) "Tobias Smollett's Satiric Spokesman in Humphry Clinker," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol13/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Sophia Andres

Tobias Smollett's
Satiric Spokesman in
Humphry Clinker



Unlike Juvenal and Horace, who had to present their satires within a well-defined structure, Tobias Smollett overcomes the limitations and boundaries of this genre by incorporating his satire within the novel--the new genre of the eighteenth century. *Humphry Clinker* represents a fusion of the two genres, while it is simultaneously a successful endeavor to preserve satire, which had started to become extinct towards the end of the eighteenth century, by presenting it in the form of a novel, thus rendering the novel more significant and the satire more acceptable.

Humphry Clinker, however, has not been generally accepted as a satire. Critics, such as Kelsie Harder and Byron Gassman,¹ have limited their criticism to a search for the background of the novel, while others, like William Todd,² have shown the difficulty of establishing the original text for the book. On the other hand, critics, such as Lewis Knapp,³ or Irma Sherwood,⁴ have analyzed the biographical elements of the work. The structure of *Humphry Clinker* has also been the concern of critics, such as Godfrey Singer,⁵ or Edward Jennings,⁶ who discuss the book as an epistolary novel. Although in an epistolary form, Albrecht Strauss and G. S. Rousseau⁷ argue, the book has structural as well as thematic unity. Furthermore, the structure of *Humphry Clinker* has led critics, like Philip Griffith,⁸ to compare it to Richardson's *Clarissa*. In

general, the book has been mostly interpreted and criticizes as a novel⁹ or a romance.¹⁰

Only recently critics have devoted their criticism to the satiric elements of *Humphry Clinker*. Ronald Paulson, for example, argues that "everything Smollett wrote demonstrates his concern with satire,"¹¹ and sees Matthew Bramble as a "satiric observer."¹² Even recently, however, critics refuse to accept *Humphry Clinker* as a satire arguing, like John Warner, for instance, that "*Humphry Clinker* benefits enormously from Smollett's freeing himself from the rigidities of satire. . . ."¹³ While, admittedly, Smollett does "free" himself from the "rigidities" of the classical satire of Juvenal, or Horace, he remains, nevertheless, a satirist channeling his criticism through Matthew Bramble who becomes his satiric spokesman.

Most critics have neglected Matthew Bramble's function as a satiric persona placing an emphasis on the other aspects of the book. While previous criticism is apparently significant to our interpretation and appreciation of the book, I would like to suggest that our understanding of *Humphry Clinker* can be enhanced if we read it as a satire. As I will seek to show, Tobias Smollett, like the classic satirist, perceived the ills of civilization, and through his satiric spokesman, Matthew Bramble, exposed an unfortunate transfusion of values within the society, and directed a severe attack against the degenerate people of his country attempting to force them to reaffirm their commitment to the old moral standards. His criticism, however, is not limited to a mere satiric attack of existing vices. While he criticizes social and individual evils, he provides the reader with the opposing virtues, the models for imitation. Within the country surroundings, away from the city, he believes, one can still find people who lead a simple living, who still value primary virtues such as social responsibility, hospitality, and friendship. Matthew Bramble then, "operates within the established framework of the society, accepting its norms, appealing to reason (or what his society accepts as rational) as the standard against which to judge the folly he sees. He is the preserver of tradition--the true tradition from which has been a grievous falling away."¹⁴

At the beginning of the novel, M. Bramble appears to be a misanthrope, constantly concerned with his own sickness, complaining about his pains and symptoms to his friend, Dr. Lewis. The misanthropic qualities within the early letters echo Pope's *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*. Like Smollett, Pope has his satiric spokesman appear as a misanthrope who seeks refuge within his own house, isolated from all people, ordering his servant to "Shut, shut the door . . ./ Tie up the knocker,

say I'm sick, I'm dead."¹⁵ Similarly, M. Bramble dwells on his sickness, complaining "the pills are good for nothing,"¹⁶ as he is pre-occupied with "domestic vexation," and "family plagues."

Tobias Smollett allows the reader to perceive the lightness of M. Bramble's sickness through his early letters where his ailments do not prevent him from being concerned with trivial matters. His letter dated April 17, Clifton, for example, is full of such matters. M. Bramble suffers from the gout, and the spleen, diseases of the idle wealthy class of the eighteenth century society. It is significant that the nature of his disease is explained early in the novel before he moves to Bath to seek a remedy. In this way, M. Bramble establishes a common ground with the upper class of his society against which his satire is mainly aimed. Smollett's technique in this case is similar to Pope's method in *First Satire of the Second Book of Horace*. At the beginning of this satire, Pope seeks to establish a common ground with the audience by presenting his satiric spokesman as "Timorous by nature, of the Rich in awe," (Pope, p. 299) thus attributing to the satiric spokesman qualities of the people that he later criticizes.

Furthermore, M. Bramble reinforces his function as a satiric spokesman in his appeal to the exigency for satire. Like the spokesman in Juvenal's, Horace's, and Pope's satires, M. Bramble is a simple person dedicated to the truth, who prefers to remain silent but "things are so bad, vice so arrant, the world so overwhelmingly wicked that even a plain man . . . is forced to attack the vice of mankind."¹⁷ In Bath, the center of remedy, the refuge of the melancholy patients, M. Bramble becomes outraged with the noise, the crowds of people constantly rushing, the decadence of the city, and he concludes his letter by expressing his compulsion to write: "I have written till my fingers are cramped, and my nausea begins to return. . . . In short we live in a vile world of fraud and sophistication." (HC, p. 67)

It is in Bath that M. Bramble becomes a severe satiric spokesman, that he recognizes himself as a misanthrope, and exposes the vices of the modern cities. "Hark ye, Lewis, my misanthropy increases everyday--The longer I live, I find the folly and the fraud of mankind grow more and more intolerable." (HC, p. 76) The positive aspect of M. Bramble's misanthropy, however, is explained by his nephew, Jery Melford, who believes that "He affects misanthropy, in order to conceal the sensibility of heart, which is tender, even to a degree of weakness." (HC, p. 57) Furthermore, Jery Melford recognizes his uncle as a satiric spokesman: "Respectable as he is, upon the whole, I can't help being sometimes diverted by his little distresses; which provoke him to let fly shafts of his satire,

keen and penetrating as the arrows of Teucer. . . ." (HC, p. 57) Or he sees his uncle going into the coffeehouses "where he picks up continual food for ridicule and satire." (HC, p. 62) M. Bramble's dedication to the need for satire resembles the quality found in the satiric spokesman, in Juvenal's Satire I, who exclaims that after perceiving the vices in the city "why then, it is harder not to be writing satires; for who/ Could endure this monstrous city, however callous at heart,/ And swallow his wrath?"¹⁸

But the satiric spokesman's criticism is not well-acceptable or justified, unless the satirist has demonstrated the spokesman's ethos. Traditionally, the spokesman's ethos was formed through his own words, his claim to his dedication to truth and virtue, and his refusal to be servile. In Pope's Dialogue II, for example, the satiric spokesman declares: "I follow Virtue where she shines I praise. . . . So proud, I am no Slave;/ So impudent, I own myself no Knave." (Pope, p. 371)

M. Bramble's ethos, however, is defined, demonstrated, and developed in a more effective manner. His virtues are confirmed and verified through his own actions which are described and commented upon by his niece, Lydia, and his nephew, Jerry. In reference to his uncle's character, Jerry remarks in his letter to a friend: "his blood rises at every instance of insolence and cruelty, even where he himself is in no way concerned, and ingratitude makes his teeth chatter. On the other hand, the recital of generous, humane, or grateful action never fails to draw from him tears of approbation." (HC, p. 97) Like her brother, Lydia also comments upon M. Bramble's good-natured personality: "he is the best tempered man upon earth; so gentle, so generous, so charitable that everybody loves him." (HC, p. 69) Through M. Bramble's own letters we perceive that he is not only an emotional but also a reasonable person since he declares that "a man must not presume to use his reason, unless he has studied the categories and can chop logic by mode and figure." (HC, p. 52) His conclusion that "the more you study the less you know," also indicates that he is an educated, intelligent man.

M. Bramble, then, partakes the most important attributes of a person in good moral standard in the eighteenth century society. He belongs to the upper class, he is an educated, well-informed, intelligent, man; he is a patriot concerned for the welfare of his fellow beings, a well-balanced person, reasonable as well as emotional, well-qualified to criticize the society in which he lives. In this perspective, M. Bramble's severe criticism against the evils of civilization becomes a justified outburst, a valid attack and reprobation. His criticism against the city resembles Juvenal's, Horace's, Pope's, and Johnson's satires that were directed against the

crowded chaotic cities, full of noise, commotion, corruption, confusion, places where people suffered from insomnia, agitation, anxiety. Early in the novel, as soon as M. Bramble arrives at Bath, he complains to Dr. Lewis about the noise and the turmoil within the city: "Instead of that peace, tranquillity and ease, so necessary to those who labour under bad health, weak nerves, and irregular spirits, here we have nothing but noise, tumult and hurry." (HC, p. 63) In Bath as well as in London, M. Bramble suffers from insomnia. In reference to his stay in London, he remarks: "I go to bed after midnight, jaded and restless from the dissipation of the day-- I start every hour from my sleep, at the horrid noise of the watchmen bawling the hour . . . still more dreadful made by the country carts, and noisy rustics." (HC, p. 151) The image of the carts, in the street at night, evokes an image in Juvenal's Satire III in reference to the life in Rome: "The waggons thundering past/ Through those narrow twisting streets, the oaths of draymen . . . these alone would suffice/ To jolt the doziest sea-cow of an Emperor into/ Permanent wakefulness." (Juvenal, p. 95) For Juvenal, as for Smollett, one of the most consuming diseases in the modern man's life is insomnia which "causes more death among Roman invalids/ Than any other factor. . . ." (Juvenal, p. 95)

In either Bath or London, M. Bramble informs us, man is completely removed from his natural surroundings, plunged into a totally artificial environment. For M. Bramble Bath is a "growing monster," and London "a misshapen and monstrous capital, without head or tail, members or proportion." (HC, p. 121) For Tobias Smollett the city becomes a monster threatening symbolically to devour man's values and his relaxation or peace of mind. In equally appalling terms, Horace's spokesman in *The Town and Country Mouse* refers to the city as "that bit of hell,"¹⁹ and Juvenal's persona labels Rome "an endless nightmare of fires and collapsing houses." (Juvenal, p. 87) Like Juvenal, Tobias Smollett comments--through M. Bramble--upon the poor, crowded accommodations in the city. Such accommodations, M. Bramble remarks, would render escape impossible in a case of a fire: "I cannot view it without horror; that is, the dreadful situation of all the families above, in case the common staircase should be rendered impassable by a fire in the lower stories. . . ." (HC, p. 255) This description is strikingly similar to Juvenal's exposition of a similar hypothetical situation in Rome: "If the alarm goes at ground-level, the last to fry/ Will be the attic tenant, way up among the nesting/ Pigeons with nothing but tiles between himself. . . ." (Juvenal, p. 94) The frailty of the buildings in Bath is also similar to that described by either Juvenal or Johnson. In regards to the apartments in

Bath, M. Bramble remarks that "they are built so slight, with the soft crumbling stone found in this neighborhood, that I shall never sleep quietly in one of them . . . any man . . . would be able to push his foot through the strongest part of their walls." (HC, p. 65) In reference to the houses in Rome, Juvenal states: "that's how our landlords arrest/ The collapse of their property, papering over great cracks/ They can sleep secure, when all the time the building/ Is poised like a house of cards. . . ." (Juvenal, p. 94) Johnson, on the other hand, sounds like either satirist in his description of London: "Here falling houses thunder on your head."²⁰

The decadence of the cities reflects the deterioration of the moral standards. Early in the novel, M. Bramble remarks that the society in Bath suffers from a transfusion of values. That is, people concentrate on an ostentatious demonstration of their wealth, as the only criteria for greatness, thus neglecting their cultural or intellectual cultivation, lacking the least sense of "propriety" or "decorum." They "discharge their affluence without taste or conduct, through every channel of the most absurd extravagance." (HC, p. 66) Tobias Smollett's criticism resembles Juvenal's attack against wealth: "still it is Wealth, not God, that compels our deepest reverence." (Juvenal, p. 69) Or echoes Pope's lamentation for the reversal of values: "That NOT TO BE CORRUPTED IS THE SHAME/ . . . White Truth, Worth, Wisdom, daily they decry-/ "Nothing is sacred now but villainy." (Pope, p. 364) Like Pope, M. Bramble remarks: "I am fully persuaded, nothing will be infamous but virtue and public spirit." (HC, p. 107)

The abandonment of the countryside for the pleasures of the city, according to M. Bramble, is the source for the existing degeneration and is further exemplified by the enormous increase of the crime rate. It is the disillusionment of those who seek their fortune in the city, M. Bramble believes, that forces them to seek other means to satiate their avarice. M. Bramble's London resembles Johnson's London "the needy villain's gen'ral home/ The common shore of Paris and of Rome;/ With eager thirst, by folly or fate."²¹ Or Juvenal's Rome "and doors on the chain, there are still burglars/ Lurking around . . . Our furnaces glow, our anvils/ Groan everywhere under their output of chains . . . / That's where most of our iron goes nowadays." (Juvenal, p. 98)

Along with the individual's vices, the maladies of modernization, urbanization and civilization, M. Bramble also exposes the venality of the arts, symbolically represented through the decadence and vulgarization of architecture. The civil buildings, according to M. Bramble, constitute an important factor for the growth and development of the citizen's taste. They ought to serve a double function: be primarily

utilitarian and secondarily aesthetically pleasing. Upon his stay at Bath, M. Bramble criticizes the architects' failure to provide people with buildings or streets serving either one of the above functions. The neglect of the public buildings, Smollett seems to believe, reflects the deterioration of the idea of propriety, proportion, symmetry, balance; it also represents the decadence of the arts, in general, ensuing upon the growth of the cities and the fusion of the classes. Furthermore, the urban architect's willingness to sacrifice utilitarian function to the appearance (such as in the case of the Gothic architecture at Scarborough), symbolically reflects man's concentration upon his own external appearance rather than upon the cultivation of his mind and spirit which can render him a useful member of his society.

Along with a series of architectural terms, Smollett has his spokesman employ medical terms also, when referring to human vices. M. Bramble regards Bath as "the rendezvous of diseased." He exclaims indignantly that "the very air we breath, is loaded with contagion," (HC, p. 76) or the portentous frenzy is become so contagious, that the very rabble and refuse of mankind are infected." In Bath, where decadence prevails, gather people with contagious diseases, as Smollett emphasizes, in an attempt to symbolically show the contaminating nature of human vices. *Humphry Clinker* is predated with medical terms resembling, in this sense, the Renaissance satire which saw an evil or corrupted person as a "sick person bursting with contagion."²²

But Tobias Smollett does not limit his satire to a criticism of the evils and vices of the society. Like Dacier,²³ or Dryden,²⁴ he presents the opposing virtues of all the vices examined, thus providing the reader with a model, a standard for imitation. M. Bramble, for example, while he is outraged and overwhelmed with vexation by the evils of either Bath or London, he constantly mentions the country where he can be in peace, removed from the tension, noise, and anxiety of the city. While he criticizes Bath as "a compound of villainous smells," he yearns for the "pure, elastic animating air of the Welsh mountains," and quotes Horace "O Rus, quanto te aspiciam!" (HC, p. 98) who also expresses his desire for the country in his satire, *The Country and the Town Mouse*. Furthermore, M. Bramble's letter dated in London, June 5, is a detailed, clear reflection of the classic satiric spokesman, who aims to balance his attack of a particular vice by offering and praising its opposing virtue. In this letter, M. Bramble juxtaposes the advantages of the country life to the shortcomings of the city life. In contrast to the "insomnia" in the city, the "refreshing sleep" in the country is presented: in contrast to the bread in London, a "deleterious paste,"

the "sweet nourishing" bread of the country is offered. For each item in the city life M. Bramble presents the corresponding item within the rural surroundings of Scotland. Similarly, Johnson presents Scotland as an idyllic place: "For who could leave unbrib'd Hibernia's land/ Or change the rocks of Scotland for Strand?"²⁵

Leading a simple existence, keeping active, Smollett suggests, prevents man from being self-absorbed, pre-occupied with his problems, removed from society. He has the time to develop friendships, to improve his public, rather than his private spirit. Once removed from Bath--where M. Bramble remained constantly self-absorbed--he finds time for friendships, encounters old friends and cherishes their conversation. In their company his pains are alleviated for the first time.

Finally, to the chaos of the city with the fusion of the classes and the lack of hierarchy, M. Bramble offers a model of hierarchy found within the rural environment of the Highlanders of Cameron: "The connection between the clan and the chiefs is, without all doubt patriarchal. It is founded on hereditary regard and affection, cherished through a long succession of ages. The clan consider the chief as their father . . . they obey him as their lord all while he exerts a paternal authority, commanding, chastising, rewarding, protecting, and maintaining them as his own children." (HC, p. 293) Through this model M. Bramble also expresses Smollett's conception of the relation of the government to the citizens, or the relation of the upper classes to the lower classes. Such a hierarchy, M. Bramble maintains, is indispensable for the stability, order, and welfare of the society.

Tobias Smollett, then, has successfully established M. Bramble as his satiric spokesman. Initially, he develops M. Bramble's ethos and, later, channels his satire through Bramble's character. His satire is directed mainly against the individual's evils which Smollett regards as the cause for the social evils. M. Bramble, like the classic satiric spokesman, condemns unsocial and self-indulgent passions that set claims of the individual above society. To the self-indulgent passions, he juxtaposes self-discipline, exercise, benevolence, patriotism and responsibility. Through M. Bramble's persona, Tobias Smollett preaches that the end of the individual's effort should be the achievement of order, stability, and harmony. The lack of public spirit leads to the deterioration of the individual and the decadence of the country. Unfortunately, today we seem to live isolated, limited within the borders of our own property, remaining constantly pre-occupied with ourselves, excluding any friends from our lives. We have smothered the public spirit and, as a result, at times we witness the slow decline of a great civilization. It is only

lamentable that our modern sophistication has increased our inertia to the point that we no longer react to the pleas and warnings of the modern satirists.

San Jose State University

NOTES

1. Kelsie E. Harder, "Genealogical Satire in *Humphry Clinker*," *Notes and Queries*, N.S. II (1955), 441-443; Byron W. Gassman, "The Background of *Humphry Clinker*," Diss. Chicago, 1960.

2. William B. Todd, "The Number and Order of Certain Eighteenth Century Editions," Diss. Chicago, 1949, pp. 48-50, 131-135.

3. Lewis M. Knapp, "Smollett's Self-Portrait in *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*," in *The Age of Johnson: Essays Presented to Chauncey Brewster Tinker*, ed. F. W. Hilles (New Haven, 1949), pp. 149-158.

4. Irma Z. Sherwood, "The Novelists as Commentators," in *The Age of Johnson: Essays Presented to Chauncey Brewster Tinker*, ed. F. W. Hilles (New Haven, 1949), pp. 113-125.

5. Godfrey F. Singer, *The Epistolary Novel: Its Origin, Development, Decline and Residuary Influence* (New York, 1963).

6. Edward M. Jennings, "Reader-Narrative Relationships in *Tom Jones*, *Tristram Shandy* and *Humphry Clinker*," Diss. Wisconsin, 1965.

7. Albrecht B. Strauss, "Design in the Novels of Tobias Smollett," Diss. Harvard, 1955; G. S. Rousseau and P. G. Bouce, *Tobias Smollett: Bicentennial Essays Presented to Lewis M. Knapp* (New York, 1971).

8. Philip M. Griffith, "Fire Scenes in Richardson's *Clarissa* and Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*: A Study of a Literary Relationship in the Structure of the Novel," *Tulane Studies in English*, XI (1961), 39-51.

9. Milton A. Goldberg, *Smollett and the Scottish School: Studies in Eighteenth Century Thought* (Albuquerque, 1959).

10. Sheridan Baker, "Humphry Clinker as Comic Romance," *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters*, XLVI (1961), 645-654.
11. Ronald Paulson, *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth Century England* (New Haven and London, 1967), p. 165.
12. Paulson, p. 194.
13. John M. Warner, "The Interpolated Narratives in the Fiction of Fielding and Smollett: An Epistemological View," *Studies in the Novel*, 5 (Fall 1973), 271-283.
14. Robert C. Elliott, "The Satirist and Society," in *Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Ronald Paulson (New Jersey, 1971), p. 213.
15. Alexander Pope, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. William K. Wimsatt (New York, 1951), p. 282. All further references will be to this edition and page number will be given in the text.
16. Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, ed. Angus Ross (Middlesex, 1971), p. 33. All further references will be to this edition and page number will be given in the text.
17. Alvin D. Kernan, "A Theory of Satire," in *Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Ronald Paulson (New Jersey, 1971), p. 213.
18. Juvenal, *The Sixteen Satires*, trans. Peter Green (Middlesex, 1967), p. 66. All further references will be to this edition and page number will be given in the text.
19. Palmer B. Smith, trans., *The Satires and Epistles of Horace* (Chicago, 1959), p. 138.
20. George S. Rousseau and Neil L. Rudenstine ed., *English Poetic Satire: Wyatt to Byron* (New York, 1972), p. 322.
21. Rousseau, p. 324.
22. Mary Randolph, "The Medical Concept in English Renaissance Satire," in *Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Ronald Paulson (New Jersey, 1971), p. 135.
23. Howard D. Weinbrot, *The Formal Strain: Studies in*

Augustan Imitation and Satire (Chicago and London: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969). Weinbrot treats Dacier's theory on satire in the chapter, "The Pattern of Formal Verse Satire in the Restoration and the Eighteenth Century."

24. Sir Walter Scott and George Saintsbury, ed., *The Works of Dryden* (Edinburgh, 1882-93, 18 vols), XIII.

25. Rousseau, p. 322.