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Verse Satire and Smollett’s *Humphry Clinker*

The form of Smollett’s novels is a topic which has frequently engaged the attention of scholars. As several commentators have observed, one of the genres which has influenced Smollett’s treatment of the novel is the formal verse satire.¹ The purpose of my paper is to give additional support to this thesis by demonstrating that a close parallel exists in verse satire for an important satiric butt in *Humphry Clinker* —the Baynards—and a satiric episode involving them. The Baynards’ estate, their manner of living, and their values closely resemble the targets of Pope’s satire in his fourth “Moral Essay.” Moreover, the “Argument” of Pope’s work² could easily function as a summary for the section of *Clinker* which is devoted to the Baynards. The “Use of Riches” is also Smollett’s concern and the Baynards provide him with a vehicle to comment upon this theme. Their villa, like those which Pope ridicules, is a paradigm of the “false Taste of Magnificence”—both in “Architecture and [in] Gardening.” In reorganizing and remodeling her husband’s estate, Mrs. Baynard ignores the norm of “Good Sense.” Consequently, she fails to “follow Nature” and perverts the “Rules” of art into “something burdensome or ridiculous” in her slavish adherence to the current mode.

Smollett makes Mrs. Baynard a prototype of fatuousness and false taste. She is only one of many women who vie to be first in fashion, tyrannize over their husbands, and dissipate their fortunes.³ Bramble writes that “she affected to lead the fashion, not only in point of female dress, but in every article of taste and connoisseurship” (II, 152). In order to keep pace with the beau monde, she makes incredible financial demands upon her husband which almost send him to the poorhouse. Fortunately for her husband, she dies before he becomes completely impoverished. She does not expire, however, until she has turned his


³ For a description of several of Mrs. Baynard’s neighbors who “vie in grandeur, that is in ostentation,” see *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, Vol. XII in *The Works of Tobias Smollett*, 12 vols. ed. George Saintsbury (London, [n. d.]), II, 154-155. Subsequent references to *Clinker* will be to the volume numbers of this edition and will appear in parentheses within the text of this paper.
NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

villa into a mass of ugliness and his gardens into a wasteland. She
transforms the estate according to current notions of taste, thereby
rendering the house inhospitable and the grounds grotesque and barren.
To the house, formerly a convent built in the Gothic style, she adds a
Grecian facade. In the grounds, she effects many changes. She redirects
a trout stream, which had run two mills, into a basin; but the basin
leaks, making the surrounding land a bog. In order to create other
modish effects, she has gardens ripped out, trees cut down, and garden
walls demolished. The result of her efforts is that now an unpleasant
wind is let in; further, the estate, which formerly was somewhat self-
sufficient, becomes totally dependent upon outside sources for its needs.
In short, at her every turn, she violates sense and taste, working
against, not with, nature.  

In particular, Mrs. Baynard resembles Timon, another prototypal
figure; and the estate she creates, like Timon’s, is a monument of false
taste prompted by vanity. His villa and grounds parallel the Baynards’

4 Note that Mrs. Baynard makes several of those blunders in architecture
and in landscaping which Pope cites in “Moral Essay IV”:

Load some vain Church with old Theatric state,
Tarn Arcs of triumph to a Garden-gate;
Reverse your Ornaments, and hang them all
On some patch’d dog-hole ek’d with ends of wall,
Then clap four slices of Pilaster on’t,
That, lac’d with bits of rustic, makes a Front.
Or call the winds thro’ long Arcades to roar,
Proud to catch cold at a Venetian door;
Conscious they act a true Palladian part,
And if they starve, they starve by rules of art.
(lines 29-38)

5 Mrs. Baynard clearly ignores Pope’s injunctions:

In all, let Nature never be forgot.

Still follow Sense, of ev’ry Art the Soul,
Parts answ’ring parts shall slide into a whole,
Spontaneous beauties all around advance,
Start ev’n from Difficulty, strike from Chance;
Nature shall join you, Time shall make it grow
A Work to wonder at—perhaps a STOW.
(lines 50, 65-70)

6 Professor Butt sees Timon as a general figure, representative of his class.
See the note to line 99 of “Moral Essay IV.”

7 Also note that echoes of Timon and his imperial manner of living occur
in Smollett’s formal verse satire, “Advice” (lines 131-144), a work which
contains numerous reverberations of Pope’s satires. (See my annotated edition
of “Advice” and “Reproof,” Tenth, VIII [Spring 1967], 45-65.) Other
in several details. He also creates an open space—a lake—which exposes his villa to the wind; erects tasteless ornamentation; and arrange his grounds in uninspired, severe, graceless designs. Pope’s comments on the extravagance involved in maintaining Timon’s estate (line 100) and on its air of cold formalities—“So proud, so grand, of that stupendous air, Soft and Agreeable come never there” (lines 101-102)—apply with equal force to the Baynard’s estate. Moreover, Pope presents Timon’s villa by means of a satiric episode which arises from a character’s reactions to an estate which he visits. This fictive event reappears in Smollett. His satirist, Matthew Bramble, also visits an estate and stays for dinner, like his verse satire counterpart in “Moral Essay IV.” Bramble too is repelled by the ceremonious dinner served, as in Timon’s villa, in a marble hall. He finds that Mrs. Baynard, like Timon, has no understanding of true hospitality: neither conveys any sense of warmth or graciousness.

These two brief episodes are similar in many respects. The tone of both satirist speakers is indignation mixed with disgust, and the source of irritation is the same in both instances: a pretentious, vain host. The values then which are under attack in these episodes are identical as well as those values which the satirists espose by implication: namely, humility, hospitality, tasteful restraint, and moderation instead of pride, ceremoniousness, vulgar profusion, and prodigality.

These dinner scenes are only parts of larger units within each work—the entire Timon section (lines 99-176) and Bramble’s complete letter of September 30 (II, 143-159)—and these larger units function satirically in a similar manner within each work as a whole. The sections devoted to Timon and to Baynard’s wife-dominated household echoes of Pope also appear in Clinker. On page 127 of Volume I there is a direct quotation from The Dunciad, III, line 296: “to lick up every knave and blockhead in his way.” (Lewis Knapp also makes this identification in his edition of Clinker [London, 1966], p. 98, n. 1.) A satiric episode involving Frogmore, who is tricked into drinking antimonial wine and then is purged (II, 167-168), may be another link with The Dunciad. (Recall the purge which Pope gave Edmund Curll alluded to in Book II, line 154 of The Dunciad.) Bramble’s complaint about the “flood of luxury and extravagance” (I, 73) which is inundating England, debasing its morals and values, and his description of the era as a “degenerate age, fast sinking into barbarism” (I, 99) also follow Pope in imagery and in diction. (See “Moral Essay III” [To Bathurst], lines 137-139 and 145.)

*See the description of Timon’s villa in lines 109-126. Note that Timon’s “drooping sea-horse” which mourns and his “dusty Urn” in which “swallows root” (lines 123-126) suggest Mrs. Baynard’s “naked circus of loose sand, with a dry basin and a leaden Triton in the middle” (II, 143).

serve as negative portraits which are complemented by positive portraits elsewhere in "Moral Essay IV" and in *Clinker*. A portion of the contrasting portrait in Pope's satire follows:

Who then shall grace, or who improve the Soil?
Who plants like BATHURST, or who builds like BOYLE.
’Tis Use alone that sacrifices Expence,
And Splendor borrows all her rays from Sense.
His Father’s Acres who enjoys in peace,
Or makes his Neighbours glad, if he encrease;
Whose cheerful Tenants bless their yearly toil,
Yet to their Lord owe more than to the soil;
Whose ample Lawns are not ashamed to feed
The milky heifer and deserving steed.

(lines 177-186)

The mode of living and the norms of utility and sense which Pope lauds in these lines are outlined by Smollett in the affirmative portrait he offers. In this portrait Smollett depicts the Dennisons, the inverse of the Baynards in almost all respects. In contrast to Mrs. Baynard, Charles Dennison and his wife are prudent, unassuming, and hospitable. They shun the world of fashion and create a productive, self-supporting estate, dotted, as Bramble notes with approval, with “detached groves, that afforded at once shelter and ornament to [their] habitation” (II, 194). Unlike Mrs. Baynard, they surround themselves with friends and live a tranquil, purposive life in a comfortable, old-fashioned house. Even their son George is the direct opposite of young Harry Baynard: he is a fine young man unlike Harry, who is rude and spoiled. The Baynard-Dennison portraits have a direct bearing upon the genre of verse satire, for they are sufficiently antithetical in nature to suggest the underlying pattern or form of verse satire: namely, its thesis-antithesis structure. I do not mean to suggest that the basic structure of *Clinker* is the same as a work of verse satire. The many divergent modes and dissimilar structures in this novel invalidate such an assertion. But for the satiric portions of the work, the Baynard-Dennison portraits provide

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10 At this juncture a final echo of the Timon portrait should be mentioned. Note that Baynard’s reinstatement as the manager of his lands and the reorganization of his estate (II, 220-221) suggest the close of the Timon section. In line 176 of “Moral Essay IV” Ceres reassumes the land, an act which parallels the movement towards order and the return to normative values that Baynard’s restoration to power effects.

11 For a description of the Dennisons and the values they hold, see Volume II, pages 189-200.

12 In an article entitled, "The Structural Design of the Formal Verse Satire" (*PQ*, XXI, [1942], 368-384), Mary Claire Randolph provides a comprehensive description of this genre.
a core, a center which focuses antipodal values. Furthermore, the values espoused by Charles Dennison are identical to those held by Smollett's major satiric agent, Bramble;¹³ and the section devoted to their description supplies the novel with its most complete statement of values. For these reasons, the portrait of Dennison and his estate—"proper Objects of Magnificence," to use Pope's phrase from the "Argument" of "Moral Essay IV"—suggests the antithesis section of verse satire and functions in a manner similar to the passage in which Pope pays tribute to Bathurst and Boyle. Such evidence of verse satire modes and structures in Smollett's final work is significant, for it points to the difficulty of making any simple generic identification of Humphry Clinker.

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¹³ Charles Dennison is in full accord with Bramble upon such matters as the folly of the beau monde and the wretchedness of city living. He too describes his era as one of "luxury and dissipation" and rails at vain, ambitious women (II, 200). And, like Bramble, he values friendship, moderation, and reason.