

Hugh Peter Was a Wit

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ABOUT a century before Hugh Peter was born in 1598, Renaissance scholars had revived and reasserted ancient theories of wit and comedy. In 1499, for instance, Pietro Valla declared that the seat or province of the laughable springs from "a certain fault and ugliness devoid of pain, as a ridiculous face is ugly without being painful."¹ In this statement Valla reflected comic theory traceable to a variety of ancient Latin works, including Cicero, Caesar, and Terence, with a literary heritage stretching back to Plato, Aristotle, and other ancient Greek authors. Moreover, this ugliness without pain must involve surprise by means of an unexpected turn of words, and good taste required that it never be employed against the poverty-stricken, the wicked, or the virtuous person, as none of these is funny. It might be real, accidental, or feigned but much emphasis was placed upon the fictitious. As Donatus put it:

Counterfeit is the dissembling of fact, a lie is what cannot happen, as fiction is what is not fact but could happen. A counterfeit is a feigned untruth similar to the truth, a lie is neither possible nor verisimilar, a fiction is wholly without truth but verisimilar. To utter a counterfeit is deceptive, a fiction clever, a falsehood stupid. To utter a counterfeit is a fault, a fiction an ingenuity, a lie a folly. We are deceived by counterfeits, we are delighted by fictions, we despise lies.²

Wit and comedy, then, depended upon ugliness introduced as a sudden surprise, devoid of pain to anyone, and preferably fictitious. It presents matter wholly untrue but like the truth in that it mirrors human life. And it deceives no one.

¹ Quoted in Marvin T. Herrick, *Comic Theory in the Sixteenth Century* (Urbana, 1964), p. 38.

² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 57.

This theory of risability was a highly intellectual one, never calculated to provoke a belly laugh and equally opposed to broad humor and to slapstick. Similarly, it drew a fine line of distinction between proper wit, on the one hand, and boorishness and buffoonery on the other. The boor was clumsy and deficient while the buffoon would stoop to indecorous language in an effort to excite laughter at any cost; and both the boor and the buffoon would often bring pain instead of—or in addition to—laughter, thereby transgressing the rules for true wit and humor. Moreover, the theory reflected its aristocratic heritage in that the subjects of wit and humor should be selected with propriety. Decorum, in the sense of artistic propriety, decreed that persons of the upper class, being heroic characters, should be kept out of comedy while persons of plebian origin, being unheroic, should be kept out of tragedy. Accordingly, the butt of a joke properly should be a plebian and the hero of a tragedy properly should be of the noble class. The rule provided that every person should be given characteristics subjectively assigned to his social status, rank, age, sex, and even nationality. In good part, then, the theory of literary decorum was based upon moral philosophy, and every assay into wit and humor should present a lesson in moral conduct. It should be uplifting and edifying. Wit and humor, then, when decorously employed, were didactic in purpose. One who transgressed these rules ran the risk of becoming, at best, indecorous; at worst, of becoming a boor or a buffoon. The universal rule, in oratory, as in life, was to consider propriety.

In his remarkable study of English grammar school education at the turn of the seventeenth century, entitled *William Shakspeare's Small Latine & Lesse Greek*,³ T. W. Baldwin demonstrates rather conclusively that English boys

³ Urbana, 1944.

were made thoroughly familiar with the prevailing theories of wit and humor and that they also read widely in collections of witty tales and jests in order to equip themselves to employ wit and humor for the moral objectives of composition and oratory. We have only circumstantial evidence regarding Hugh Peter's preparation for college;⁴ but, regardless of which of the "systems" he was brought up under, there is every reason to believe that he was put through his paces in grammar, rhetoric, and moral philosophy (as were other schoolboys of the time) and that he was made familiar with the current theories of wit and humor and their proper application. Indeed, when we consider his lifelong penchant for witty jests and pithy rhetoric, it appears reasonable to suppose that he took hold of these aspects of his formal education with zestful enthusiasm. And if he sought out collections of witty tales to enlarge his boyish repertoire beyond the relations of Boccaccio, Erasmus, and other humanist works to which he was introduced in the classroom, there were several current English publications to which he could turn. These included a half-dozen or more collections of the witty tales of Tarlton, such as *Tarltons Toyes* (1576), *Tarltons Tragicall Treatises* (1578), *Tarltons Devise upon this unlooked for great snowe* (1579), *Tarltons News out of Purgatory* (c. 1590), and others attributed to this popular Elizabethan jester.⁵ Further, there was *The Pleasant Conceites of Old Hobson the merry Londoner, full of humorous discourses, and witty Merriments. Where at the quickest wittes may laugh, and the Wiser sort take pleasure*, published at London in 1607. "Old Hobson" was said to be "a haberdasher of smale wares, dwelling in the lower end of Cheapside, in the Poultry," and his collection included "merriments without hurt, and humorous jests savoring upon

⁴ See my *The Strenuous Puritan: Hugh Peter, 1598-1660* (Urbana, 1954), p. 16.

⁵ See James Orchard Halliwell, *Tarlton's Jestes, and News out of Purgatory* (London, 1844) for a life of Tarlton and an account of the various editions of works attributed to Tarlton.

wisdom." ⁶ Many of the tales later attributed to Hugh Peter resemble those of "Old Hobson" in form and content. ⁷

Pulpit wit was not unusual in England although there were those who frequently criticized its use. Medieval friars had popularized the use of colloquial analogies, metaphors, and similes after the manner of the early church fathers, ⁸ and the English Church of the Reformation abounded in witty preachers. One of the first—and greatest—of the Reformation pulpit wits was Hugh Latimer whose power and popularity as a preacher to the masses lay in his ability to adapt his sermons to the meagre literary capacities of his hearers. His racy, discursive style, spiced with quaint humor and colloquial tales, made him one of the most widely attended and effective preachers in the mid-sixteenth century. ⁹ Hugh Peter might well have felt complimented had he lived to see the unfriendly pamphlet published in 1661 comparing him with Hugh Latimer! ¹⁰ But Latimer had his critics, too. Thomas Wilson,

⁶ Published in London, 1607. "Collected together by R.[ichard] Johnson." (British Museum C.39.d.2)

⁷ The Thomason Collection in the British Museum includes other jest-books with which Hugh Peter might have been familiar. See especially, Antony Copley, *A Fig for Fortune* (London, 1595), and the same, *Wits, Fits, and Fancies: Or, A generall and serious Collection, of the Sententious speeches, Answers, Jestes, and Behaviours, of all sortes of Estates, From the Throne to the Cottage.* . . . (London, 1614). British Museum, C.40.d.35. Other English jestbooks of the day are analysed in F.P. Wilson, "The English Jestbooks of the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries," *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, II, 121-158 (Jan., 1939).

⁸ See G.R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1933), pp. 22 ff.

⁹ Edwin Charles Dargan, *A History of Preaching* (2 vols. Grand Rapids, 1954), I, 491; Clement Wilson Fairweather, Jr., "English Sermon Wit: 1550-1660" (Ms. Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton, 1940). University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Mich. Publication No. 2945, pp. 22-24.

¹⁰ "Semper iidem: or, a Parallel betwixt the Ancient and Modern Fanaticks," London, 1661. Published in *Harleian Miscellany* (William Oldys and Thomas Park, eds. 10 vols. London, 1808-13) VII, 398-407. The pamphlet ends with a comparison in parallel columns:

Hugh Latimer, son of a husbandman in Leicestershire, pretended to the office of the ministry, affected a drollish way of holding forth in the pulpit, was a great enemy to bishops and clergy, and as great a patron of fanaticks; and, finally, was burnt at Oxford, the sixteenth of October, 1555.

Hugh Peters, of like mean extraction, usurped the office of the ministry; was used by Oliver, as a fit instrument in the pulpit, to encourage rebels in their evil ways; had a great hand in spilling the royal blood; was no better a friend to the hierarchy, than other sectaries are; was hanged, drawn, and quartered at Charing-Cross (the same sixteenth of October) 1660.

in *The Arte of Rhetorique*, published in 1553, had lashed out against preachers who “play the fooles in the pulpit, to serve the tickle ears of their fleeting audience, or els they are like sometimes to preach to the bare walles. . . .”¹¹

Both the Courts of Elizabeth I and of James I approved of witty discourses and the English Church in both reigns embraced clergymen of extraordinary wit. Tobias Matthew first attracted the Queen’s notice the year of his ordination in 1566 and he rose rapidly in the Church, being elevated by King James to the Archbishopric of York in 1606. Henry Smith, in spite of Puritan inclinations, was defended by Lord Burghley and served for many years as preacher at St. Clement Danes in London, where he became known as “silver-tongued Smith” because of his ingenious exegesis and ability to incorporate witty tales in his sermons. Lancelot Andrewes, who served as Chaplain to Whitgift and Chaplain in ordinary to the Queen, found ecclesiastical favor in both reigns. James I appointed him bishop of Chichester in 1605, of Ely in 1609, and of Winchester in 1619. He also served in the Hampton Court Conference (1604), with the translators of the King James Bible, 1611, as dean of the Chapel Royal, 1619, and as privy councillor both for England and Scotland. Throughout his career he was famous for his effective use of wit in the pulpit, especially for his clever use of theological paradox and familiar metaphors. According to Fuller’s *Church History of Britain*, Bishop Andrewes awed James I, and the King held this “star of preachers” in the highest esteem.

Indeed, I am led to suspect—though I can adduce no convincing evidence—that Hugh Peter’s pulpit style may have been patterned after that of Bishop Andrewes. After he had completed his work at Cambridge for the bachelor’s degree, Hugh Peter spent many months in London where,

¹¹ Quoted in Fairweather, *English Sermon Wit*, p. 168.

as he said, "in order to ripen my studies . . . I attended Dr. *Gough*, *Sibs*, and *Davenport* ministry, with others. . . ." It was entirely possible that the "others" included Bishop Andrewes with whose sermon style Hugh Peter's came to be remarkably similar. Both men frequently used a play on words, including verbal quibbles and occasional jingles; both men employed colloquial metaphors and other forms of familiar schematic figures; both men told quaint, facetious tales to drive home a point—though Hugh Peter did this with greater frequency. Both men used comparison as a basis of wit. And both men appeared to be very conscious of the fact noted later by Robert South that "it is the most ignorant, and illiterate country people, who, of all men, are the fondest of high flown metaphors and allegories."¹² John Donne's sermon style was very similar to that of Bishop Andrewes, though Donne was more restrained in his use of metaphor. In recent years, John Donne has been given more attention as a poet than as a divine; but it is well to recall that his sermons rank among the best of his day. And it may be useful further to point out that Hugh Peter may have listened to Donne at St. Paul's while the fledgling Puritan "ripened his studies" about London in the late 'teens and early 'twenties of the seventeenth century.

II

Hugh Peter's reputation as a wit developed after his return to England in 1641. There are scattered bits of evidence from his early career in England and it may be that his witty bent in sermonizing was the cause of his rejection by the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1629 on the suspicion that Mr. Peter did not demonstrate the acceptable solidity and solemnity of character desired for the newly projected

¹² Quoted in Fairweather, *English Sermon Wit*, p. 68. Cf. *The Strenuous Puritan: Hugh Peter*, pp. 34-35.

plantation.¹³ The evidence during his exile in the Low Countries between 1628 and 1635 is equally unsatisfactory. When he subsequently turned up in New England in 1635 there is at least one letter from him to the elder Winthrop indicative of his love of jesting,¹⁴ and one gets an impression that Governor Winthrop considered Hugh Peter to be a droll fellow. He returned to England in 1641 as an agent for the Bay Colony and soon allowed himself to become so entangled in English affairs on the eve of the First English Civil War that, in spite of asserted intentions to the contrary, he never returned to New England. In 1642 he accompanied Alexander Lord Forbes on the privately supported expedition against the Irish rebels, and his *True Relation* of the strange campaign, as published by order of the House of Commons, went far to identify the Irish rebels with King Charles I, whose banner had been raised at Nottingham a month before the return of Forbes.¹⁵ "An Irish Rebel and an English Cavallier," wrote Hugh Peter in a pithy summary of his view of the situation, "in words and actions we found as unlike as an egge is to an egge." From this point onward Hugh Peter was dedicated to the task of promoting reformation in the English Church and State.

There appears to have been no hesitancy on Hugh's part as to which of the contending parties he would espouse. By mid-July, 1643, he was engaged by the deputy lieutenants of Kent and Sussex to press the people into the Parliamentary ranks, to join the county militia, to contribute money, jewelry, plate, horses, and military supplies, and to discredit and disarm "malignants," as the king's supporters were called.¹⁶ The Civil and polemical aspects of the under-

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-41.

¹⁴ *M.H.S. Collections*, VI, 92.

¹⁵ *The Strenuous Puritan: Hugh Peter*, ch. 8.

¹⁶ Peter's commission is published in the *N.E.H. & G. Register*, XXXIX, 371-72 (Boston, 1885).

taking did not appear to trouble Hugh Peter, who easily identified the Parliament's cause with the good news of the gospel. He was fully aware of the fact that the rebuke of evil is virile and sometimes rude, and the struggles of the day called forth a sharpness of polemic not always consonant with Christian love. If he sometimes overstepped the bounds of decorum it was but seldom. He tailored his utterances to the people whom he addressed, most of them rude, uneducated, jovial rustics, with the coarse, worldly tastes of the seventeenth century commonalty. And clearly he himself followed the advice which a year or so later he imparted to a soldier-turned-preacher in the New Model Army; "that I should not use to preach such high things, to poor Ignorant people, that were not able to bear it."¹⁷ Soon the newssheets began to report Hugh Peter's witty sallies, and there began the collection of tales that developed into a widespread tradition which presented Hugh Peter as a witty preacher or, as his enemies would have it, a buffoon and mere pulpit play-actor.

In *A Letter From Mercurius Civicus to Mercurius Rusticus*, dated from Oxford in August, 1643, it was reported that Hugh Peter was instructing women from the pulpit "to hug their Husbands into this Rebellion."¹⁸ On another occasion, when the congregation supposed that Hugh Peter had finished his sermon and they began to depart, Hugh asked for a word or two more. Most of the congregation stayed. Whereupon Hugh Peter said:

Beloved, in former time there were three creatures agreed to go on a pilgrimage together, by name, a Man, an Eele, and a Swallow: They accompanied one another a great way, til the two latter were almost tyred; whereupon, coming to a Wood, the Bird watches an opportunity, and flies away: Now there remained only the Man and the Fish, and they kept together still, until they came to pass over a small brook; but the

¹⁷ Capt. Francis Freeman, *Light Vanquishing Darkness* . . . (London, 1650), p. 39. (British Museum, E. 615 (7)). The episode evidently occurred about 1645.

¹⁸ British Museum, E. 65 (32). Dated by Thomason, "Aug. 25."

Fish seeing the waters, gives a slip to the man, and was never seen after. Now the Man was left alone; but on he goes and having passed the brook, espies on the other side several long rods; these he laies into bundles: Now beloved, what think you these rods were for; I'le tell you, they were to whip such men as will make hast from a Sermon, and return to hear a tale. So much for this time.¹⁹

As Hugh Peter preached in a village church in which there hung the royal arms, he prayed, "Good Lord keepe us from the yoke of Tyranny; Preserve thy servants from the paw of the Lyon, and from the horne of the Unicorne."²⁰ After he had preached two hours on a fast day, Mr. Peter turned the hour glass over and said, "Come, my Beloved, we will have another glasse, and so we'll part."²¹ In another sermon he was reputed to have said that "the Word of God had a free Passage among us, for no sooner in one ear than out the other."²²

After a few months in Kent and Sussex, Hugh Peter was commissioned by the Parliamentary Committee of Public Safety to carry the Parliamentary cause to the Dutch people, whose royalist sympathies had been aroused by the presence of the English Queen, Henrietta Maria, and other royalist agents there.²³ The task was similar to that which Hugh had been performing in Kent and Sussex and obviously, the Committee hoped that, by his previous stay in the Low Country, Peter would have been familiar with the Dutch scene and know useful people there. He arrived in the United Netherlands near the end of September, 1643, and soon the English newsheets were reporting on his activities there. The royalist sheet, *Mercurius Aulicus*,

¹⁹ *The Tales and Jestes of Mr. Hugh Peters* (London, 1660), p. 15. Another version is printed in *The Strenuous Puritan: Hugh Peter*, p. 276. The former was said to be told at Christ Church; the latter at West Ham. Yet a third version is told in *The Diary of Abraham De La Pryme* (Charles Jackson, ed., *The Publications of the Surtees Society*, LIV, Durham, 1870), p. 51.

²⁰ *The Tales and Jestes of Mr. Hugh Peters*, p. 26.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²³ Peter's Commission is published in the *N.E.H. & G. Register*, XXXIX, 372-73 (Boston, 1885).

reported late in December that the Parliament was seeking to raise money both at home and abroad and that

. . . Master *Peters* is sent over to his old Congregation in *Amsterdam*,²⁴ to invite the well-affected to liberal contribution towards the *Cause* in *England*, which he did mighty powerfully on Sunday was three weekes, telling his Disciples, what a shame it was for Professors, that Religion only should stand at a stay when all other Arts and Sciences were mended; for (said he) the Invention of Gunnes, Printing, and Tobacco, doe daily increase, but we in England onely stand still in the service of God, and content ourselves with a womans Religion, a Religion no better than that of Queen Elizabeth. Wherefore, he exhorted all the Brethren and sisters to pull off their Chaines, Necklaces, Bracelets, Rings, and superfluties, and send them to the assistance of God's people at London. But ere long you may have him at *Rotterdam*, where now he is elected in the place of Doctor *Beaumont*,²⁵ one who hath preached there above nine years, but is found too learned and too honest for their service.²⁶

Mercurius Britannicus, the Parliamentary sheet, replied the first week in January, saying that *Mercurius Aulicus*

. . . tells us of Mr. *Peter's* Sermons and Exhortations in Holland to the Ladies and Gentlewomen, for their Jewells to the Cause, and their bracelets; it is very true Mr. Peters hath been abroad, and acting, and persuading for the public Cause, and I think he moved for the superfluties; and indeede he reports of *famous Jewels* in the Congregations where he hath beene, almost as good as those *Crown Jewels* which was pawned in *Holland* [by Queen Henrietta Maria] for Gunpowder and Fireworkes. . . .²⁷

Shortly after this, *Mercurius Aulicus* reported that Hugh Peter was dead in Holland. But *Mercurius Civicus*, *London's Intelligencer* scotched the rumor, saying:

Amongst many the fictious reports raised by the Malignants in this City, and published in print by their grand Patron of Forgeries *Mercurius Aulicus*, at Oxford, one was, that the worthy Divine Master *Hugh Peters* died in Holland since his last going over thither, the falsity of which report is now evidently apparent, in regard of his present residence in London, whither he came on Saturday last, March 2, and (I suppose) would be willing to bestow a Sermon upon the Cavaliers, either in Ely, Peters, or London house, if they should be desirous of it, to satisfie them both of his life and constancy to his former principles, and

²⁴ Error. Hugh Peter's Congregation had been with the English Merchant Adventurers at Rotterdam.

²⁵ Error. See *The Strenuous Puritan: Hugh Peter*, p. 219.

²⁶ *Mercurius Aulicus* . . . , Dec. 24-30, 1643, pp. 738-39.

²⁷ *Mercurius Britannicus* . . . , No. 20, Jan. 4-11, 1644 (N.S.),/N. (SC) p. 154.

to set forth unto them their envious and undue proceedings in such a powerfull and excellent manner, that if they had but any sparke of goodnesse or ingenuity, they should not onely be convinced, but repent themselves, and bee ashamed of their former actions against the Parliament and scandals raised against him.²⁸

On Tuesday, April 25th, 1644, a Thanksgiving day was held for Lord Fairfax's victory at Selby:

. . . Mr. *Peters* preached at St. *Dunstons* in the West, an excellent Sermon and to the purpose, the Oxford party do him the honour as to hear him, where ever he preaches, standing in the remotest parts of the Church, where they laugh and jeere, as if they were at a Play, and the Constables say not, why do they so? You see we give Liberty of conscience: We will give you some of his expressions, one was that the forces of the King were coming to Basing and Newberry, which is true, and were ten or twelve thousand strong, that Prince *Rupert*, and my lord *Manchester* were within 15 miles of each other, that it therefore concerned us to look about us, for the next weeke might be the bloodiest weeke we have yet had; he declared his dislike that so many Commanders when danger was so neer should be walking up and down *London* streets, he gave us good evidence that our Religion and Liberties were gone if we lost the day; he prest much expedition in the prosecution of the war; as a way to prevent pestilence and famine, he would have men fight the Cause, not as the Dutch and others, put the Cause into the Pockets, he would have men that fight be of more religious life than the French great Commander, under the Earle of *Manchester*, who was extremely displeased one night after supper, crying out in a passion, what no Dice, no Cards, no Whore, no Wine, the Devill take all? but my Lord Cashiered him: he cried out upon the faint hearted Lords and Gentlemen, saying that whereas they had Bulls and Lyons, Tygers, and such like terrible beasts in their Arms, it were good they have them taken out; and a hind, or a hunted hare, or a hand with a Schole-Masters rod in it, put in stead of them.²⁹

Since the outbreak of the civil war the Independents, by a number of astute policies, had both increased their following and strengthened their position. One of these policies was the promulgation of limited religious toleration. Hugh Peter was one of the first in his party to introduce this policy. At the outset, the Independents merely demanded toleration for themselves; but they soon discovered that if they widened their scope to embrace all persons who held fast to "the fundamental doctrines of Christianity"—a con-

²⁸ *Mercurius Civicus. London's Intelligencer* . . . , No. 41, Feb. 29–March 7, 1643–4, p. 426.

²⁹ *The Parliamentary Scout* . . . , No. 44, April 18–26, 1644, p. 370.

veniently vague and undefined principle—they could weld to their own political faction persons belonging to a wide variety of religious sects. As early as 1643, Hugh Peter had noted that “some rivers have been noted to differ in the colors of the water, yet running in the same channel.”³⁰

Now, in the spring of 1645, Hugh asked his hearers both at Plymouth and at London the following meaningful questions:

. . . suppose a father have five children, one a drunkard, another an adulterer, a third a swearer, and so the rest, and he cannot reclaim them, will he presently throw them into the Thames? Will he not wait for their amendment, use means for their conversion? So now in a Kingdom there are some Anabaptists, others Antinomians, others Brownists . . . will the magistrate presently . . . cut off their heads and kill them?³¹

Hugh Peter identified himself increasingly with the Independent faction just as it was growing in favor with Parliament. And this growing favor coincided with Parliament's need to reform and improve its military forces. The multiplication of separate, county forces had drained the counties of men, money and supplies without furnishing a mobile, efficient, national army. “New Modelling” was in the air. Hugh Peter furthered this objective in a sermon when he told his congregation:

You come hither to make your selves merry, but I shall tell you the truth: This Kingdom of England is an Asse; and ever since this blessed Parliament rid this Asse alone, the silly Beast drove very, very finely: but so soon as ever the Parliament took up a committee man behind him, the Asse has so kickt and winced, that I feare he will never leave untill he hath cast off both his Riders; For these Committee-men are the greatest oppressers that ever this Kingdome yet groaned under: and the only obstacle of our Peace is because these Committee-men have not yet married all their daughters.³²

It may have been about this time that Hugh Peter, preaching at Trinity Church in Cambridge, stated that “there were some red-coats as sure to go to Heaven as he [could] touch

³⁰ In his *Church-Government and Church-Covenant Discussed* (London, 1643), unpagged.

³¹ Thomas Edwards, *The Third Part of Gangraena* (London, 1646), p. 122. Peter also advocated wider toleration in New England. See his letter to Winthrop, *M.H.S. Proceedings*, X, 19.

³² *Mercurius Academicus*, 11th week, Feb. 23, 1645/6, pp. 97-98. The original is all in italics.

the sounding board of the pulpit. [Whereupon] He lifted up his hand, but could not touch it by a foot." The cavalier diarist who recorded this incident went on to say that Hugh's performance was regarded as an ill omen by the Royalists.³³

By the spring of 1645, the New Model Army had come into being and Hugh Peter joined it, first as chaplain to the train, under the immediate command of Lieutenant-General Thomas Hammond, and, later, as chaplain to the general staff. But he was more than a mere army chaplain. He took part in army councils, kept himself thoroughly informed of the progress of the war both in a military and in a political sense, and soon emerged as the principal liaison between the New Model and its nominal master, the Parliament.³⁴ He was repeatedly rewarded by Parliament for his services, and, when the latter determined to appoint April 2, 1646, as a day of thanksgiving "for these blessings upon our Armies," Hugh Peter was invited to preach the thanksgiving sermon before the Houses. The first Civil War was won on the battlefield, but the objects for which it had been fought still hung in the balance, the outcome depending upon partisan intrigues.

God's Doings and Man's Duty was the title which Hugh Peter chose for his sermon.³⁵ Given before both Houses of

³³ Rev. Andrew Clark (ed.), "Dr. Plüme's Notebook", in *Essex Review*, XIV, 153 (Colchester, 1905). A variation of this story is in *The Tales and Jestes of Mr. Hugh Peters*, p. 23.

³⁴ I omit reference to Hugh Peter's reports to Parliament of the New Model victories. See *The Sirenuous Puritan: Hugh Peter*, pp. 251 ff. By and large, the reports were a canny mixture of battlefield reporting and subtle partisan politics designed to curry the favor of Parliament. But they were not without flashes of Hugh Peter's wit: in his report on *The Rifeling of Basing*: or, *Mr. Peter's report to Mr. Speaker, and other members of the House of Commons* (London, 1645), Hugh described a particularly hard fought struggle made doubly bitter on both sides because the defenders were heavily Roman Catholic in their religion and very richly provisioned (which aroused the greed of the ravaging New Model soldiers). Of the "8 or 9 Gentlewomen of ranke running forth together," reported Hugh Peter dryly, "[they] were entertained by the common souldiers somewhat coarsely, yet not uncivilly, they left them with some clothes upon them. . . ." (p. 2.)

³⁵ London, 1646.

Parliament, the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of London, and the Westminster Assembly of Divines, it was dedicated to the Lords and Commons since "*it was your pleasure to make choice of me to bring in a Narrative of God's bounty, as being an Eye-witness to many of his glorious works. I have obeyed in this, and that. I knew not what better to pitch upon then God's doings, and your duty.*" The text was Psalms 31:23: "Love the Lord all ye his Saints: for the Lord preserveth the faithful, and plenteously rewardeth the proud doer." Clearly, the "saints" consisted of all those who loyally supported the Parliamentary cause and the "proud doer" was the King who had been "plenteously rewardeth" on the field of battle. It was the duty of the saints to love the Lord because He had preserved them, although, as Hugh said, "I could wish some of my learned Bretherns quarrelling hours were rather spent upon clearing the Originals, and so conveying over pure Scripture to posterity, then in scratching others with their sharpened Pens, and making Cockpits of Pulpits."³⁶ Let the saints remember how the Lord had preserved them.

Fathers: Tell your little ones this night the story of 45. the towns taken, the fields fought, tell them of neer 30000 prisoners taken this last year, 500 piece of Ordnance, tell them of the little loss on our side, be sure to let them know it was for the liberty of the *English* Subjects you fought, charge them to preserve the liberties that cost so dear, but especially the liberties purchased by the blood of Christ, and above all, let them know that the God of heaven is the God of *England*. . . .³⁷

Hugh placed the blame for the war squarely on the King's shoulders:

Petition after Petition, Declaration after Declaration; nothing would prevaile, but the acceptance of such a remedy as would prove worse than the disease: And then before the birth, what throws and pains? Send to *Denmark*, run to *Holland*, fly to *France*, curse *Digby*, imprison *Hamilton*, &c, and then all help called in for midwifery, intreat friends here and there, pawn jewels, break and close with Irish even in a breath; anything for help: hazard posterity, ingage in marriage, and as she did, rore out,

³⁶ *Gods Doings and Mans Duty*, p. 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

Give me a child or I die! and that miscarriage we are this day to praise God for, and wonder at. The summe totall of all these endeavours of the proud comes to nothing but vanity and emptiness, all these conclusions vanish into a lie: the Parliament is not destroyed, the City stands, the Gospel is preached; we do not yet heare the screeches of deflowered damosels, nor the cries of abused matrons, we hear not the ratling of their arms, nor the neighing of their horses in the streets. Oh, my Lords, you are not at *Oxford*, led up and down as Sampson, to be looked at by children nor are you crying as poor Belisarius, *Date obulum Belisario, date obulum!* Nor you Gentlemen of the other House, crying out at a prison gate to some mercifull man for a penny; Nor you, my Lord Major and your Brethern, under a great ransome for your freedome; . . . And you (my reverend Brethern) who have been part of the divided spoile, you feele that mercy that gives them a loud lie.³⁸

I hear much of differences, opinions, sects, heresies [continued Hugh Peter], and truly I think they would belesse, if we did not think them so many: One errour, and but one, our Saviour gives caution about, and lately I have thought much upon: He sayes, *Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees*. And if we knew what the leaven were, it would help us in these fears. This I suggest therefore. Leaven hath three properties. 1. It soures. 2. It tuffens, or hardens. 3. It swels the lump. Therefore that opinion which soures mens spirits against their brethern, and it may be against Authority, that swels them, and prides them, that hardens them, and makes tough, and not easily intreated, beware of that opinion, as of the leaven of the Pharisees.³⁹

And, lastly, Hugh Peter begged for more gospel preaching in England: “. . . whilst we are disputing here, they are perishing there, and going to Hell by droves; whilst we are striving for an Eldership clothed with authority, we shall want five thousand Ministers to preach. . . ; the people are desperately ignorant & prophane abroad; and from prophane Priests and ignorant people, you know the other party have fomented this war, and may begin it again if the Word prevent not the Sword.”⁴⁰ Hugh pleaded with his brethren to lay aside their petty differences and preach the Gospel in order to save the souls of the English people.

Hugh Peter's pleas for unity among the Parliamentarians fell on deaf ears. In the spring and summer of 1646, after the King's final defeat at Oxford, the English Presbyterians,

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

secretly depending upon the Scottish Army in case of need, plotted to secure with Charles I a treaty which would establish Presbyterianism in England as of divine right. Soon the Presbyterians and the Independents were to raise up a second Civil War. Hugh Peter became one of the principal advocates of Independency whose ultimate strength lay in the New Model Army. He seemed to be everywhere, and just as he had been the bane of the Cavaliers in the first war, now he became the *bête noir* of the Presbyterian faction. News-writers and pamphleteers treated him severely and, after biting attacks from William Prynne, Thomas Edwards, and Nathaniel Ward (the last-named well known in New England for his *Simple Cobler of Aggawam*), Hugh Peter took up his pen to defend both himself and the New Model Army.

The result was a polemical tract exhibiting both wit and forcefulness. It was entitled, *A Word for the Armie. And Two Words to the Kingdome. To Clear the One, and Cure the Other. Forced in much plainness and brevity from their faithful Servant, Hugh Peters*.⁴¹ In this work, Hugh Peter reached the apex of his polemical wit:

Though I have looked upon the Scriblings of this age as the fruits of some mens idlenesse, and most mens folly, and therefore should not willingly have owned my selfe, if found among that Rabble. Yet when it grows so unlimitedly high, and impudently brazen, that some men I know, men even above flattery, and so sleek & smooth, in their uprightness (Among whom I place the present Generall [Fairfax] and his Second [Cromwell]) that I thought nothing of that kind could stick; and yet these besmeared by uncircumcized pens.⁴²

So Hugh had made two resolves. First, to petition Parliament to set up a censorship of the press, "at least [that] men may put their names to their Papers":

My second Resolve is [continued Hugh], though not to answer every late pamphlet punctually, which rather then doe, I might undertake to cleanse the stable in the story: yea though my Share lies so much in

⁴¹ London, 1647.

⁴² *A Word for the Armie* . . . , p. 3.

them, that it would be costly to purchase cleane handkerchiefs to wipe off every spattering on my face, and could as shortly and more truly answer all as did *Bellarmino* with *thou lvest*; knowing no publike instrument in no age, in no place can travel without others dashing and dogs barking: yet to prevent stones from speaking, and graves from opening, or some horrid unheard of thing from appearing, to satisfie the wide-mouthed world, and the black-mouth'd Pamphleteers, I shall in plainnesse and faithfulness shew you the Armies wounds since they put up their sword, and with them the States diseases; and in humility offer the cure, and leave all to a wonder-working God.⁴³

This is the sum of Hugh Peter's defense of himself. He then turned to a defense of the Army, reciting "negatively," as he said, all the evils charged upon the New Model. The principal charge made was that the Army was disobedient; says one,

. . . they have defloured the *Parliament*: another, they have ravisht the City; another, they are Sectaries, enemies to Government, false to God, to man, friends, enemies to themselves. They have lost *Ireland*, ruin'd England; Oh! taxes and free quarter; Oh! this trinkling with the Court Cryes one; Oh! their doubtful carriage with the Court cryes another; . . . I doe not think Paul heard such a confused noyse, when himselfe could hardly get leave to speake; That the word *Army* must answer all the doubtfull mischievous deadly questions in the World. For *Example*:

Who brings Famine? The *Army*.

Who the Plague? The *Army*.

Who the Sword? The *Army*.

Who hinders Trade? The *Army*.

Who incenseth Scotland? The *Army*.

Who hardens the King? The *Army*.

Who confounds all? The *Army*.

And if it should be askt the *Cavaliers* and *Malignants* who conquer'd you: they would answer, the *Army*. If the *Presbyters*, who disappointed you? The *Army*; If the *Independents*: Who leaves you in the darke? The *Army*; And if *Haman* were askt what he would doe with these *Jewes*? we know the answer: alas poore *Army*: *qualis de te narratur fabula?* . . .⁴⁴

The remainder of Hugh Peter's *A Word for the Armie* . . . is given over to a defense of the Army's behavior and suggested "cures" for the evils of the kingdom. The army had done a good job and delivered up "a free Kingdome to an ungratefull Inhabitant, and to an envious Cruell piece of a Parliament"; and the "cures" for the kingdom lay in a

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4-5.

reform of parliament, a reform of the law, a reform of the economy, a reform in education, and a reform in the church. In these latter recommendations, Hugh Peter anticipated some of the reform measures which he subsequently enlarged upon in that remarkable Puritan reform tract entitled *Good Work for a Good Magistrate*, published in the early years of the Commonwealth (1651), after the second Civil War had been won and Charles I had become a royal martyr.

III

Perhaps enough has been said to illustrate the fact that Hugh Peter was a wit. Certainly the opinion was fortified by his contemporaries, especially by his opponents who, resentful because Hugh made sport of them, labelled him with all manner of unkind and uncivil epithets and condemned him for cheapening the pulpit with tawdry jests and crude play-acting. It was in this same unfriendly spirit that, close upon Hugh Peter's execution (October 16, 1660), there appeared from the press two separate collections of jests attributed to him. The larger of these was called *The Tales and Jestes Of Mr. Hugh Peters, Collected into one Volume. Published by one that hath formerly been Conversant with the Author in his life time*. The compiler of this small, thirty-two-page booklet signed himself "S.D.", and appears to have been a London printer named Simon Dover.⁴⁵ The book was ironically dedicated to John Goodwin and Philip Nye "because you have been copartners with him [Hugh Peter] in many of his misdemeanors; so that you are by most well-Principled men term'd, *A Triplicity of Traytors*." The compiler stated that Hugh Peter had "inrolled his name in the Catalogue of Wits," and that "I finding in his Discourses so much of *Wit* and *Mirth*, could not but gather up these

⁴⁵ *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, Charles II, 1663-1664*, p. 422.

fragments. They are amongst them several Pulpit-flashes, . . . collected out of many of his Sermons, by the pen of a ready writer. . . ." There follow sixty badly numbered jests and tales attributed to Hugh Peter.

This volume was republished with minor alterations by James Caulfield in London, 1807, with "Some Account of Mr. Hugh Peters," the latter being a compilation of errors and fabrications previously set forth by a variety of Hugh Peter's enemies. In the British Museum copy of Caulfield's edition⁴⁶ are bound a number of manuscript pages, possibly in Mr. Caulfield's hand. Whoever may have been the author of these pages, he hazards some interesting opinions about *The Tales and Jestes of Mr. Hugh Peters*. Ten of them, the author asserts, were probably authentic, originating with Master Peter; twelve more were possibly authentic; nineteen were very doubtful; four were malicious fabrications; thirteen were plagiarized from other sources; and two were too silly to credit at all. Unfortunately, the unknown author of these opinions gives us none of the foundations upon which he formulated his judgments. I suspect that the unknown writer was substantially correct in his opinions. But there existed in 1660 a wide variety of sources from which one could compile a series of "tales and jests" to attribute to Hugh Peter. Newsheets and pamphlets, especially those written by Hugh Peter's critics and antagonists, had been fulminating tales and jests and placing them at Hugh Peter's door since the early 1640's. A variety of other collections of witty tales had been published, such as *Witt's Recreations*,⁴⁷ the various publications of John Taylor, "the Water Poet," Thomas Dekker's *Villanies Discovered by Lanthorne and Candle-light*. . . ,⁴⁸ various works attributed to

⁴⁶ B.M. 12316.1.39.

⁴⁷ *Witt's Recreations refined & Augmented, with Ingenious Conceits for the Wittie, and Merrie Medicines for the Melancholie*, London, 1640. The British Museum has this, together with subsequent editions in 1641, 1645, 1650, 1654, 1663, and 1667.

⁴⁸ London, 1620; a second edition appeared in 1638.

the exploits of James Hind, an adventurous highwayman captured in 1651,⁴⁹ others attributed to another thief, Richard Hannam,⁵⁰ and still others of less popularity. All of these works contained witty tales similar to, and in some cases almost identical with, *The Tales and Jests of Mr. Hugh Peters*. Any printer who wished to publish a collection of witty and off-color stories had a wide field from which to compile his book.

Out of this mass of press outpourings, most of it pretty miserable stuff, it is well-nigh impossible to determine with accuracy those tales and jests which originated with Hugh Peter. From diaries, note-books, and some of the more reliable newssheets it is possible to authenticate fifteen or sixteen of the *Tales and Jests* which pretty clearly were Hugh Peter originals.⁵¹ Another half dozen may possibly have been authentic.⁵² The others are tales that were "in the air" at the time; some of them were attributed to others of the day as well as to Hugh Peter; a few were very old stories reaching back to Chaucer or before. I am loath to accept the tales which are lewd and lascivious not only because Hugh Peter denied them but also because I do not believe that Hugh Peter would have kept the warm friendship and esteem of such families as the Winthrops and the Cromwells had he indulged in unclean living or broadcast smutty jokes.⁵³

The second collection of tales and jests attributed to Hugh Peter shortly after his execution was entitled, *Hugh Peters Figaries: Or, His Merry Tales, and witty Jests, both in*

⁴⁹ *James Hind, the Robber Chieftan . . .* (London, 1651); George Fidge, *The English Gusman; Or the History of that Unparallel'd Thief James Hind* (London, 1652).

⁵⁰ *The Witty Rogue Arraigned, Condemned, & Executed. Or, The History of that Incomparable Thief, Richard Hannam . . .*, London, 1656.

⁵¹ I would hazard the opinion that Nos. 4, 15, 18, 21, 31, 32, 33, 40, 43, 34 (misnumbered for 44), 48, 50, 51, 55, 57, 60 in the *Tales and Jests* were substantially authentic, although some of these tales appear elsewhere in somewhat different dress.

⁵² Nos. 5, 6, 13, 30, 58, 59.

⁵³ See, for example, Nos. 7, 37, 45 (for 46), 47.

City, Town, & Countreys. . . . Printed for George Horton living in Fig-Tree Court in Barbican, 1660.⁶⁴ This is an eight-page pamphlet containing only twenty-two jests, all of them substantially repeated (or retold) from Simon Dover's *Tales and Jestes*, though neither in the same order nor in identical language. Very little more needs be said of the pamphlet. I suspect that it was plagiarized from Simon Dover's larger collection as a potboiler for Mr. George Horton. Both books attest to Hugh Peter's reputation as a wit albeit, in both cases, by unfriendly hands.

IV

Hugh Peter preached during a classic period in the history of the English pulpit. As a prominent member of a party whose cause was temporarily lost in 1660 and its partisans consigned to foul disgrace, Peter's published works have been the victim of much inattention. Too many literary historians and critics have shovelled Independent literature (excepting that of John Milton) into the trash basket, convinced that, because the Puritans frowned on the theatre, they possessed neither wit nor humor worthy of notice and that, because their sermons were long, often theological in content, or polemical in intent, they were dull, uninteresting examples of early seventeenth century literature. There is, of course, truth in this opinion. But, also, there were exceptions. I submit that Hugh Peter's works are worthy of being included among these exceptions. He was one of a very few Puritan preachers who won a reputation for wittiness and jesting in the pulpit and, though the humor of his jests is often lost to the twentieth century reader, the wit still frequently shines through. Some of his fellow Puritans frowned severely upon his practice. Richard Baxter, for

⁶⁴ I have used the copy in the Bodleian Library, Oxford (Malone 647).

example, complained against jesting with the Word of God, holding that levity "did not play with holy things" and that wittiness was "proud foolery" that distracted the worshippers from the duty at hand.⁵⁵ As the "plaine style" grew popular in Restoration days, pulpit wit declined. Robert South, John Eachard, Joseph Glanvill, and other Restoration critics disapproved of the use of witty jests in the pulpit—although wit prospered in other forms of literature.⁵⁶ Perhaps fresh studies of Puritan literature in the first half of the seventeenth century will uncover a larger degree of wit and humor than has hitherto been recognized: there must have been some early Puritan roots to Yankee humor! In Hugh Peter's case, it appears that his wit sprang from an inner ebullience of spirit over which he exercised little conscious control, and his command of language (including the occasional Latin phrase!) was broad and powerful. If we are correct in excluding lewdness from Hugh Peter's wit, he seldom (if ever) overstepped the canons of wit which he had learned in his youth, in spite of his frequent engagement in acrimonious controversy. If he stooped to common metaphor and popular tales in his sermons it was but a mark of his exceptional ability to carry audiences filled with illiterate, ill-educated, and rustic people. And he never failed to draw the moral of his tale or to expound the gospel of Jesus Christ. No doubt, however, his wit was a factor in his undoing; its bite only envenomed the more the hatred of his political antagonists.

⁵⁵ Fairweather, *English Sermon Wit*, pp. 17-18.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* Cf. also, W. Lee Ustick and H. Hoyt Hudson, "Wit, Mixt Wit, and the Bee in Amber," *Huntington Library Bulletin*, No. 8, 103-130 (Oct., 1935); and J. E. Spingarn (ed.), *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century* (2 vols., New York, 1908). II, *passim*.

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