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## 'Philip Skelton as Ecclesiastical Satirist: Satire and Sociability in *Ophiomaches*'

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## 4. 'Philip Skelton as Ecclesiastical Satirist: Satire and Sociability in *Ophiomaches*'

Burke's famous dismissal of Bolingbroke may be applied to the eighteenth-century Irish clergyman and writer, Philip Skelton: none but specialists read him now; perhaps only Coleridge ever read him through. Despite this neglect, Skelton is interesting for several reasons. As an opponent — and early historian — of British and Irish Deism, he contributed to a tradition of theological writing, the "intellectually conservative and uniquely clerical 'Arminian Enlightenment,'" that is increasingly being seen as the central British and Irish intellectual movement of the period.<sup>1</sup> In his major work, *Ophiomaches; or, Deism Revealed*, Skelton identifies some of the affinities between writers loyal to orthodox religious positions and those critical of them, affinities that cause B. W. Young to remark that "the boundaries between England's Enlightenment and its Counter-Enlightenment are decidedly permeable."<sup>2</sup> In correspondence with Samuel Richardson, Skelton showed himself an enthusiastic reader of his friend's novels, and when the literary qualities of his major work are understood, they show affinities with the work of other contemporary novelists. In this essay, I will argue that Skelton's strict questioning of sociability in *Ophiomaches* shows that, important as it was as an ideal in eighteenth-century intellectual culture, politeness was not accepted and practised uncritically. I will

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1 B. W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 174. David Berman anticipated this development in British historiography when he located Skelton within a comparable Irish Counter-Enlightenment. "Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment in Irish Philosophy," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 64 (1982): 148-65, 257-79.

2 Young, *op. cit.*, 218.

also suggest that the literary qualities of *Ophiomaches* can best be appreciated when the work is read within a tradition of what I shall call ecclesiastical satire.

Those who now know anything about Skelton's writing know that *Ophiomaches* was reviewed for its publisher, the bookseller Andrew Millar, by David Hume. On the way from his curacy in Ireland to London, where he considered that the work would attract more notice than it would if published in Dublin, Skelton had stopped in Oxford to consult the Dean of Christ Church and orthodox hammer of the deists, John Conybeare. Conybeare suggested he add to his attack on deism a discussion of Hume's recently published essay on miracles. Having done this, Skelton must have been surprised when, as his biographer Samuel Burdy relates,

The bookseller [Millar] desired him, as is usual, to leave [the manuscript] with him for a day or two, until he would get a certain gentleman of great abilities to examine it, who could judge, if the sale would quit the cost of printing. These gentlemen who examine manuscripts, in the Booksellers' cant, are called *triers*. 'Can you guess (said he to me) who this gentleman was, who tried my Deism Revealed.' 'No, I cannot.' 'Hume the infidel.' He came it seems to Andrew Millar's, [Burdy continues,] took the manuscript to a room adjoining the shop, examined it there for about an hour, and then said to Andrew, *print*.<sup>3</sup>

Skelton's purpose in *Ophiomaches* is to 'reveal deism,' and as his calling Hume an 'infidel' would suggest, he attacks deism aggressively. His argumentative strategy is to contrast 'real Christianity' with 'real Deism,' so he ignores differences between (and subtleties or inconsistencies within) the works of skeptical writers.<sup>4</sup> He defends a unified orthodoxy — 'the fundamental articles of Christianity' — so little accommodating of liberal theology that all but the most unimpeachable of the Latitudinarians are treated as virtually a fifth column for deism.<sup>5</sup> In this strict

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3 Samuel Burdy, *The Life of Philip Skelton*, intro. Norman Moore (1792. Reprint. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), 100. Hereafter abbreviated as *LPS*.

4 Philip Skelton, *Ophiomaches: or Deism Revealed*, introd. David Berman (London, 1749. Reprint. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1990), I, xvii-xviii. Hereafter abbreviated as *ODR*. Publication history before this reprint edition was limited. There was a second edition, titled *Deism Revealed* (1751) and a German translation (1756). *Ophiomaches* was part of a five-volume *Works* (Dublin, 1790) and a six-volume *Works* (Dublin, 1770 and 1784) was published in a "second edition" edited by R. Lynam (London, 1824).

5 *ODR* II, 296

separation of sheep and goats, Skelton is, as Coleridge called him, 'a *Bit of a BULLY*,'<sup>6</sup> so not surprisingly, reaction to *Ophiomaches* was mixed.<sup>7</sup> As the work's printer — Skelton's friend Samuel Richardson — wrote to him, "I have the pleasure to tell you, from an ingenious friend at Cambridge, that your book is in high reputation there. In other places, I have heard you found fault with for personal severity, especially on the Bishop of Winchester."<sup>8</sup>

This early reception does not foretell the neglect into which *Ophiomaches* would fall. Although Skelton treats Deism as a continuing threat, the movement, as Leslie Stephen recognized, lost both constructive and critical energy after the deaths of Anthony Collins, Matthew Tindal and Thomas Woolston between 1729 and 1732. Modern discussions of these figures (and of another of Skelton's targets, John Toland) have done without *Ophiomaches*. Stephen refers to Skelton only twice, without saying why he does not discuss him more fully. Perhaps John Leland's much longer history of Deism, published slightly later, seemed a more thorough treatment; perhaps Skelton's strong distrust of human reason and evangelical insistence on the need for revelation made his arguments uncongenial; perhaps Skelton's recognition of how some writers on opposite sides of the controversy converged in their arguments anticipated Stephen's own view, but without Stephen's attitude of bemused superiority, making acknowledgment and fuller discussion inconvenient.<sup>9</sup> Nor have the literary qualities of *Ophiomaches* received attention. Like Berkeley's anti-deist *Alciphron*, which Skelton had praised in an earlier work, *Ophiomaches* is developed as a series of dialogues, eight in all. But because he is not a philosopher comparable to Shaftesbury,

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6 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol. 12, *Marginalia*, Volume IV Pamphlets to Shakespeare, ed. H. J. Jackson and George Whalley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 51.

7 If Samuel Burdy is any example, Skelton's writing was thought to be both clumsy and over-elaborate, even by well-wishers. Burdy expressed a view echoed distantly by Neal Garnham in his *ODNB* entry on Skelton, that in places *Ophiomaches* is 'defective in point of arrangement, the matter . . . too loosely thrown together, the arguments . . . [do] not follow in regular order.' 'The style,' Burdy continues, 'is also somewhat coarse; words are uselessly multiplied, and arguments drawn out beyond their proper bounds. The author, in his attempts at wit, frequently fails; he is merry himself, but the reader unhappily cannot join him in the joke' (*LPS* 106).

8 Letter of 10 February 1750 in *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, ed. Anna Laetitia Barbauld (London: Richard Phillips, 1804), V, 198-200.

9 Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, Preface by Crane Brinton (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962), I, 140, 262.

Mandeville, Berkeley or Hume, Skelton is not mentioned in Elizabeth Merrill's (or any more recent) discussion of eighteenth-century "philosophical dialogue";<sup>10</sup> and although he cites Lucian as one of his models (Plato is the other), because Skelton writes dialogues between imagined characters, and thus not strictly "dialogues of the dead," *Ophiomaches* is not discussed in any treatments of that genre.<sup>11</sup>

The concern that prevails in Skelton's work, as it prevailed in his life, is action in the world. An overriding concern that clergy and laity be prepared to live their faith in daily acts of charity explains his use of literary form in *Ophiomaches*. In his thinking about how the Christian life is to be lived and the message of the gospel is to be spread, Skelton is especially concerned that Christianity will be compromised by clergymen conforming to 'the politeness and freedom of the times'.<sup>12</sup> Such conformity Skelton considers a likely consequence of clergymen associating with gentlemen, so Skelton's qualities as a satirist will be introduced in a discussion of his treatment of sociability. Skelton models and tests sociability in the interpersonal relations between four interlocutors. Skelton's protagonist Shepherd — the name indicates his exemplary clerical character — lives on an income of £34 a year that he receives from a small living, and a further £34 a year that he earns from a small rented farm. The other participants are Shepherd's landlord, Mr. Dechaine, who has used a large fortune gained in the practice of law to purchase a landed estate, Mr. Dechaine's sycophantic clerical hanger-on Mr. Cunningham, and Mr. Templeton, a young man of twenty-five to whom Dechaine has been guardian and Cunningham tutor since Templeton lost his father at the age of fifteen. Through the first seven dialogues, Dechaine proposes objections to Christianity raised by a variety of deists and Shepherd refutes them, patiently suffering a series of anticlerical taunts, as well as a steady stream of sly innuendo that he himself is as self-interested a parson as any London-loving absentee holder of a rich benefice. Out of disgust, and because they have consistently had the worst of the argument, Dechaine and Cunningham do not appear for the eighth, and much the longest, dialogue. This leaves only Shepherd and Mr. Templeton, the latter having played the honest interlocutor, agreeing with objections to Christianity as long as

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10 Elizabeth Merrill, *The Dialogue in English Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1911).

11 See especially Frederick M. Keener, *English Dialogues of the Dead: A Critical History, An Anthology, and A Check List* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

12 ODR I, 4.

these seemed reasonable, but harkening to Mr. Shepherd's superior reasoning as it develops. In the eighth dialogue, Mr. Templeton confesses (ingenuously) that Shepherd has shown him the error of his libertine ways and he listens appreciatively to Shepherd's account of the history of English deism, and especially to the criticism of its most dangerous exponents and supporters, those writers who call themselves Christians but who define their faith in ways that lead weaker brethren astray: Samuel Clarke, John Locke and Benjamin Hoadly.

Like many writers of eighteenth-century texts not concerned with religious issues, Skelton makes a casually satiric attitude an important element in sociability. In other works, good-natured raillery is one of the demonstrations of affability by which gentlemen put one another at ease, assuring one another of good will especially in potentially acrimonious discussion. Although such raillery sometimes happens in *Ophiomaches*, it is rarely good-natured: more often, it constitutes part of Dechainé's posture as a freethinker. Impressions of "ease" are often forced, and interpersonal satire registers the tensions between Skelton's protagonists, tensions that arise from their incompatible views of the world and the commitments that follow from them. In his treatment of sociability, as in his repeatedly ironic treatment of the Earl of Shaftesbury in the discussion of deism, Skelton has one target: that 'spread of "politeness" from discourse to discourse [reflecting] the appropriation of the world of social, intellectual and literary creation by gentlemen: . . . the remaking of the world in a gentlemanly image' in which Lawrence Klein has shown Lord Shaftesbury's wide influence.<sup>13</sup> As effectively as it may have regulated social behaviour in accordance with Shaftesbury's political programme, the 'culture of politeness' also made social relations mysterious in ways that those excluded from the culture, or made uncomfortable by some of its implications, wanted to criticize. Over the course of the work, Skelton criticizes the ideal of politeness associated with Lord Shaftesbury and proposes his own idea of Christian politeness as an alternative to it.

Skelton considered that occasional wit could usefully lighten a long series of dry arguments. He later wrote to Samuel Richardson, apropos of *Clarissa*, that 'nothing [is] more unpalatable to most men than morality and religion. They will not go down, if they are not either well pep-

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13 Lawrence Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral discourse and cultural politics in early eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 7.

pered and salted with wit, or all alive from end to end with action."<sup>14</sup> The first seven of his dialogues take the form of what Northrop Frye calls Menippean satire and concern themselves with building a structure of intellectual argument in which the claims of rival systems are advanced and assessed, and Skelton is well aware that his work needs the leaven of occasional humour, as well as the dialogue form, which he says he chose "for [readers'] entertainment".<sup>15</sup> In his Preface, Skelton admits to having included "some strokes of a lower faculty than that of reason".<sup>16</sup> These instances of wit — Dechaine's jibes at Shepherd, Shepherd's sometimes sly responses and occasionally ironic accounts of deist writers — can best be read as ecclesiastical satire. As I use the expression, ecclesiastical satire employs wit and irony in the service of faith and the institutions that the writer claims should nurture it; in Skelton's case, the institution in question would be the Church of England as by law established in Great Britain and in Ireland. Admittedly, the use of "satire" in this sense (Frye's "mythos of winter") to describe effects within a Menippean satire, the "form of [prose] fiction which is extroverted and intellectual,"<sup>17</sup> can be confusing, and that is why I prefer the word "anatomy" as the name of the form. The central impetus behind ecclesiastical satire (in both senses of the word) has been well characterized by Howard Weinbrot in his strategic limitation of the term "Menippean satire" for specific uses in the criticism of classical, of seventeenth-century French and of eighteenth-century English satires: Menippean satire opposes "a dangerous, false, or specious and threatening orthodoxy."<sup>18</sup> For Skelton, deism is such a "false orthodoxy."

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14 Letter of 28 December 1752 in *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, V, 222-3.

15 ODR I, xii. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 309. This work will be referred to hereafter as AC. The more inclusive category of "anatomy" (AC 311-2) also fits the first seven dialogues, and Skelton admits that it is because he is concerned primarily with the forms of intellectual argument that he has altered his use of the dialogue form away from the practice of both Lucian and Plato in cutting "the frequent interruptions and rejoinders [that] must, in the midst of so much matter, and so many topics, have spun out the work to such a prolixity, as seemed too great a trespass on [readers'] time and patience" (ODR I, xii). Because it will be contrasted with two of Frye's three other kinds of "Specific Continuous Forms" of "Prose Fiction" my use of "Menippean satire" and "anatomy" should be referred to Frye's whole discussion of these forms (AC 303-14).

16 ODR I, vi.

17 AC 308.

18 Howard D. Weinbrot, *Menippean Satire Reconsidered: From Antiquity to the Eighteenth*

A long tradition of ecclesiastical satire in English (from Langland through Spenser and Milton to Swift) stands behind Skelton; writers such as Erasmus and Pascal can be included in the continental tradition; and other, later English writers, such as Blake, can be related to the English tradition. Ecclesiastical satire includes much more than simple ridicule (sometimes extremely rough) of writers who question, critique or deny the fundamentals of the Christian faith, or of anticlerical critics of Church presumption. The ecclesiastical satirist is as concerned with reforming abuses within the Church as he is with defending the Church against enemies attacking it from without, and so the satire may also be directed, even in the mouths of scoffing detractors, against aspects of faith and practice that the satirist thinks need correction. (Clerical presumption and the theological weakness or moral failings of some clergy may be major targets of ecclesiastical satire.) Skelton makes some of Dechaine's anticlerical banter as strong as it is because, as Shepherd admits, it legitimately applies to not a few clergymen. There is also, in the best ecclesiastical satire, a strong element of critical self-reflection, as the satirist challenges, and if need be, corrects his own assumptions and practices. The still small voice of honest self-questioning or of candid confession may not sound as prominently as the voice of genuine indignation, but the satirist has heard it and any apology he writes for his own actions will show that he has heeded it.

Shepherd and Dechaine's first exchange (in Dialogue I) renews an acquaintance begun more than thirty years previously in terms that suggest no love has been lost since their last meeting:

Dech. Who lives in that little house, thro' which we entered the garden?

Shep. It affords shelter to a poor relation, and his wife, with two servants.

Dech. I am told, you are still a single man yourself. How comes it to pass that, in so long a time, you have doubled neither your person nor your chin? You don't fast and mortify surely?

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*Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 6. Weinbrot works to limit what he considers the too inclusive senses given to the category by Frye and by Mikhail Bakhtin. So limited, the term describes only satire that is such in the sense of Frye's "mythos of winter," and so it no longer describes all that makes *Ophiomaches* an "anatomy." In addition, Weinbrot's specification of further elements in his "Menippean satire," one of two tones which address the problem that such satire never fully achieves its purpose, prevent the category from applying to Skelton.



Shep. It is no fault in me, that I am not married; for my circumstances are but narrow: nor is it a merit, than I am not fat; for my state of health is but indifferent.

Dech. How modest! with another you would turn all this to Saintship.

Shep. No, Sir, I am as far from that species of dissimulation as yourself.<sup>19</sup>

Skelton's deployment of wit is often like this: leading, almost insulting suggestions from Dechaine; dry, laconic understatement from Shepherd. Any impression of ease and mutual desire to please should be read as an accident, or as civility constraining real ill will. Dechaine and Shepherd both strive for advantage, Dechaine jealously guarding a sense of *amour propre*, Shepherd countering with more temperate insults licensed by his Christian commitments.

Mr. Cunningham, a cunning man where his livelihood is concerned, plays a minor role in the dialogues. Dechaine's description of him to Shepherd develops a dramatic irony in that, although Dechaine says that Shepherd will not like Cunningham, he does not understand how completely Shepherd's dislike will arise from the very qualities that Dechaine praises. Such dramatic irony allows readers to anticipate (and helps them to appreciate) Mr. Templeton's gradually developing re-evaluation of his guardian and tutor:

You don't care for him perhaps, because you may have heard he was educated at *Glasgow*, where, if we may judge by those, who come from thence, the minds of young persons are formed to a much more open and liberal turn, than in the Universities of *England*. The good effects of his education appear in his behaviour, which is humane and prudent. I do believe he hath not a single enemy upon the face of the earth. He hath many and powerful friends, and hath already tasted the fruits of his own merit, and their attachment to him, in two rich benefices, which he is now in the enjoyment of. Nay, I think I may assure him, his rise in the world is not yet at its meridian.<sup>20</sup>

Dechaine's praise skillfully delineates (and through it Skelton satirizes) the time-serving sycophancy and its benefits — benefices enjoyed in profitably pluralist non-residence — which Skelton considers egregious ecclesiological abuses. Mr. Cunningham's reply, which he modestly

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19 ODR I, 2.

20 ODR I, 14.

calls self-effacing, demonstrates an almost self-parodying obsequiousness: 'You are always very good, Sir; and I shall have more merit a great deal, than I dare think myself possessed of, if I can deserve the smallest part of your favours. While I am so happy as to be well with such persons as you, I have enough to comfort and defend me against the envy of lower people'.<sup>21</sup>The rest of the time, Cunningham's contributions amount to little more than citing passages from Scripture to support Dechaine's assertions that Scripture is garbled and obscure, and that reason is therefore the only reliable guide to morality. These attempts to perplex and dash Mr. Shepherd's maturer counsels always fail.

The fourth gentleman, Mr. Templeton, indicates early that he will listen candidly to what Mr. Shepherd has to say. For Skelton, a fair hearing is all Christianity needs to convince anyone, and part of his design in *Ophiomaches* is a deliberate delay of Templeton's full conviction. Before his final conversion, Skelton does suggest that Mr. Templeton has always, like Samuel Richardson's 'practical libertine,' Lovelace, known better than he has practised. When Templeton indicates that he thinks a resurrection possible, Dechaine mocks him for his belief, and when Templeton quietly informs his guardian that he has thought this way before, Dechaine sends him back to the nursery:

*Dech.* Well, *Templeton*, the Parson is likely to make a very strong believer of you. He could not reasonably hope for a more forward disciple.

*Temp.* It is not just now that I began to think the resurrection possible.

*Dech.* No, I believe not. You probably thought so since you was fed with that, and other the like food for babes, in the nursery. Children suck in marvellous tales at a strange rate, and find it difficult to clear their heads of them at a ripper age.<sup>22</sup>

Dechaine's unflappability in such exchanges is not the mature self-possession of a mind that cannot be upset by unexpected resistance. It is, rather, a demonstration of the self-sufficiency that Shepherd claims is the essence of Deism and that Templeton will later identify as the spirit of libertinism.<sup>23</sup> Dechaine's complacent self-sufficiency seems in no danger until he completely loses his composure and stays away from

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21 ODR I, 15.

22 ODR I, 29.

23 ODR I, 55 & II, 267ff.

the final dialogue. The tone in which, at the end of the first dialogue, Templeton declares his willingness to participate in further conversations and the manner in which Shepherd responds to him point toward a willingness in the two men to respect and trust one another that is the opposite of self-sufficiency: '*Temp.* Mr. Shepherd does not seem to be so diffident of his cause as to decline it. If I was well enough acquainted with the gentleman to ask a favour, I would beg his compliance with this overture, as a singular kindness to me'.<sup>24</sup>

Insofar as such trust is a sign of openness to influence, Templeton's invitation models that true politeness which for Skelton can only be Christian, respecting as it does a spiritual position, not a person only.

As Templeton opens himself to spiritual influence, Dechaine turns his irony on him as well. In Dialogue VI, when Dechaine knows he has consistently been losing the argument, he elaborates a favourite idea in his allegorical description of Templeton as a horse ready to be priest-ridden, but perhaps not to be trusted for all his apparent compliance. His challenge and Templeton's reply model for Skelton the ideal ingenuity that ought to follow from unprejudiced loyalty to reason:

*Dech.* Pr'ythee, *Templeton*, consider, that if you leap so plumb into all the Parson's sentiments, he will believe you are only bantering him. He heard, before he saw you, that you were beginning to think freely; and now that he finds you suffer him to slip the bridle so quietly over your ears, and mount you, he will be apprehensive it is only in order to take some freakish fling, and throw him in the dirt. He may assure himself, I know well enough how to make you do it; and I give him fair warning to hold fast, and keep himself firm in his new seat, or the affair of mysteries, which I am going to touch on, will turn his tame ambler into a very resty jade.

*Temp.* If thinking freely, and closing with reason, whenever I am so happy as to get a sight on't, which you have often recommended to me in the strongest terms, should open my mind to truth, tho' in the mouth of a Parson, I hope you will not endeavour to frustrate the ingenuous effects of your own repeated advice, by turning me into ridicule merely for reducing it to practice.

*Shep.* You need not fear it. Mr. *Dechaine* is fond of humour, and he does not intend to use his raillery, which flows merely from his particular turn of mind, as an obstruction to your freedom of thought. Neither he, nor his cause, stand in need of jests or artifice, or any aids, foreign to reason. Besides, a little humour now-and-then helps so enliven a conversation of this kind, and hinders it from

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24 ODR I, 47.

degenerating into a dry dispute; to which, from the nature of the subject, it is perhaps a little too inclinable.<sup>25</sup>

In this tongue-in-cheek acceptance of Dechaine's humour, and sly allusion to Shaftesbury's "Of the Freedom of Wit and Humour," Shepherd politely, even graciously, pretends not to value advantage — thus confirming that he holds it. Shepherd's mock reassurance works nicely, simultaneously propounding a simple-minded *ars satirica* and throwing Dechaine's high confidence back in his face. As he does elsewhere, Shepherd, in his reply makes his own jest on his antagonist.

At the end of Dialogue VI, Dechaine turns another satiric slap, this time at Templeton's willingness to agree with Shepherd, into an invitation to dinner. His mocking evocation of the figure of the well-fed parson does not bother Shepherd. The insult is benign — or commonplace — enough that for once Shepherd allows Dechaine to have the last word:

[*Dech.*] But is it not time, think you, after so much thought and care for the soul, to provide for the poor body? *Shepherd* himself, tho' rapt in spiritual speculations and mysteries, must at length descend, like one of us, to repair the breaches of his corporeal tabernacle, and gratify the importunities of the outward man.

*Shep.* Yes; but I am thinking how much more convincingly I should argue for religion in the present times, could I subsist without food, and save those who hear me, the expence of a maintenance.

*Dech.* A Parson, and not eat! that would be a most persuasive miracle indeed.<sup>26</sup>

Templeton's role in the dialogues is not simply to play the young man awakening to a sense of his sinful life. He also expresses Skelton's ethical criticism of the sociability that masks a timid or self-serving refusal to violate politeness in order to condemn an immoral act. In Dialogue IV, he admits that when he ceased to fear eternal punishment for sin he "set little or no bounds to [his] pleasures, many of which were . . . highly prejudicial to the souls of others, as well as [his] own".<sup>27</sup> As he learns to control the convenient prejudices that encouraged self-indulgence

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25 ODR II, 96.

26 ODR II, 148.

27 ODR I, 293.

and works toward the possibility of self-denial, Shepherd asks him what, beside his pride, encouraged him to adopt "libertine principles". Templeton replies circumspectly, admitting that he was guilty of ingratitude to Mr. Cunningham, but he also ironically inflects an ecclesiastical expression of keen interest to a pluralist: "I will hint to you, that I was fond of pleasure, of a particular pleasure, which Christianity would not tolerate, and which my new principles did. A very near relation of Mr. Cunningham's reaped the first fruits of the education he had given me; which, however, did not disturb our harmony in the least".<sup>28</sup>

The manner in which Mr. Cunningham considers his 'near relation's' virtue less important than the sociable relationship with a large landowner through whom he pursues material advantage indicates for Skelton not just shocking indifference to morality: it is also a general principle with him that a clergyman ought to cultivate no relation that might compromise his speaking frankly without respect to rank. Mr. Cunningham's statement that his standing well with such as Mr. Dechaine helps him to bear 'the envy of lower people' shows just how thoroughly his conformity to the world — specifically, to an ideal of gentlemanly sociability — has compromised his exercise of his clerical vocation. His practice of politeness as a means to self-interested ends indicates much that Skelton considers is wrong with that ideal.

For Skelton proper Christian sociability allows a clergyman to perform his function of proclaiming the gospel and ministering to the needs of his parishioners, even if that means reproving the behaviour of his social superiors. It is important not to set others at their ease if there are reasons to criticize them; the art of pleasing is less important than the pastoral work of reminding men of what will be pleasing to God. Shepherd states frankly (but always courteously) his beliefs and his resolve to live by them, he criticizes Templeton as frankly, and he extends ready sympathy when Templeton admits his errors in thought and deed. A clergyman must also carefully limit his association with gentlemen. Sensitive to the accusation that poor clergymen haunted their patrons' houses, Shepherd behaved discreetly toward his former landlord, dining with him (at his invitation) after Sunday service but not waiting on him at other times of the week.<sup>29</sup> The dialogues culminate in the establishment of a similarly regular, and mutually satisfy-

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28 ODR II, 284, 284-5.

29 ODR I, 2-3.

ing, social relationship between Shepherd and Templeton, one founded not on politeness, but friendship.<sup>30</sup>

When he repudiates deism, Templeton effects the 'awakening' called for in the frontispiece to *Ophiomaches*, in which the caption 'Awake thou that sleepest' addresses a young warrior in a wooded setting sitting asleep over his shield, divested of his helmet, with his spear leaning against a tree. In declaring that Shepherd has become a second father to him and taking him as a mentor, Templeton resembles several young men in mid eighteenth-century English fiction. Whether successful or failed, whether sought by the older or the younger of the pair, such mentoring relations are not uncommon: Parson Adams proves a comically ineffectual, even hypocritical counsellor of Joseph Andrews; Lord M. fails to influence his nephew Lovelace; Sir Charles Grandison takes Dr. Bartlett as mentor and spiritual guide; and Sir George Ellison's companion Mr. Lamont — the closest to Skelton's Mr. Templeton — improves from the example of the ladies in *Millenium Hall*. Skelton develops this relationship not just so that Shepherd may establish an alternative to Shaftesbury's politeness; he also raises the possibility that Shepherd stands to benefit personally from his eloquent exposure of deism, by virtue of the way it requires him to show real self-denial.

Out of gratitude for Shepherd's spiritual influence, Templeton wishes to render him material benefits 'as an offering to God, and [as] the first-fruits [he is using the phrase without irony this time] of my return to him from principles so odious in his sight'.<sup>31</sup> When he proposes that Shepherd move into his house, however, Shepherd is cautious. Templeton wishes to fine-tune and render permanent their relationship, but Shepherd realizes that should he accept Templeton's offer, his appeal to Templeton through the dialogues might be said to amount to no more than a shrewdly self-interested strategy to ingratiate himself with a new patron. Rightly or wrongly, this could be called priestcraft and thus, Shepherd would deserve Dechaine's criticism, although his social success might forestall it.

I have suggested that in ecclesiastical satire the satirist assesses and criticizes himself. In Shepherd's insistence that he intends to remain in his parish despite Templeton's warning that Dechaine intends to impoverish him, and his agreement to accept help from Templeton only should it be needed, Skelton is scrutinizing his own motives. Shepherd will not move into Templeton's house (as Templeton wishes), nor does

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30 ODR II, 415.

31 ODR II, 414.

he accept Templeton's second proposal, which features an arrangement of house and garden and space beyond that is disconcertingly similar to a conventional setting for erotic intrigue in the early novels of Eliza Haywood and in the novels of Samuel Richardson, who imitated Haywood in this respect:

*Temp.* It is more in regard to your satisfaction than my own, that I will propose another scheme to you, better suited to your inclinations, and state of health. On the further side of my gardens, which are pretty extensive, stands a neat farm-house, with convenient offices, orchards, &c. To this I can annex a little parcel of grounds, and a small annuity, on which you, your relation, and two or three servants, may be as happy, as ease, innocence, and retirement, can make you. I will furnish the house, stock the farm, and provide it with all the necessary implements of husbandry. There is a door, opening out of my gardens into the fields I intend for you, to which you shall have a key, and another to my library, where you will find about three thousand volumes, collected by my father and grandfather, who were men of learning and taste. These you may use at your discretion, either in the library, or at your own house.<sup>32</sup>

To estimate how attractive such a prospect may have seemed to Skelton, we need only remember that before he left London in 1749-50, he spent the 200 pounds he realized from *Ophiomaches* on books to take back to Ireland. The modest, bookish competence Shepherd rejects would have been for Philip Skelton the extent of his earthly wish and care. Shepherd's self-denial in rejecting it is no literary flourish, but an aspect of Skelton's own scrupulous self-assessment.

It is also the result and consolidation of Skelton's deliberately shifting the eighth dialogue away from the form of the anatomy to the form of the confession, and of his looking beyond that to the form of the novel. Without opponents, Shepherd and Templeton no longer play their parts in building the structure of ideas that has preoccupied them through the first seven dialogues. When Skelton claims at the end of his Preface that "the present performance is intended, by its Author, rather as an introduction to a further, and more perfect course of reading, on the reigning controversy, than as a complete system of all that can, or ought to be said thereon," he is not simply being modest, he is indicating that, however fully he has introduced a "system," faith as assent to a complex of theological propositions means less to him than faith

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32 ODR II, 413.

as a mode of action in the world.<sup>33</sup> Both Templeton and Shepherd have by the end of the work made confessions, in the sense that they have achieved a coherence of character and attitude and in so doing identified themselves with something larger than their own egos.<sup>34</sup> They do not intend to rest quiescently contemplating a purified doctrine. The exclusive “interest in ideas and theoretical statements” characteristic of the confession is, Frye points out, “alien to the genius of the novel proper, where the technical problem is to dissolve all theory into personal relationships”.<sup>35</sup> For neither Templeton nor Shepherd will faith be a complex of theological propositions to be contemplated: faith will be a matter of relationship, of a life lived in charity towards others. This is why Shepherd turns in the last dialogue from the abstract elaboration of ideas to a history, an account of lived experience explaining where he and Templeton stand and suggesting how they should go forward. In his concern above all for practice, Skelton shows that, whatever the limitations of his literary gifts, when life is transformed into art, he knows it is lived as a novel, as fully as possible in relationships, and as little as possible according to the formulas by which deists declare the eternal fitness of things so as to excuse to themselves their living under the control of their passions. In the anatomy, “characterization [tends to be] stylized rather than naturalistic, and presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent”.<sup>36</sup> If Skelton’s deists are less mouthpieces, less the self-congratulatory philosophers that Sarah Fielding’s Mr. Orgeuil is, then in this small respect Skelton is more of a novelist than Fielding. Skelton also knows, however cruelly conformed to the world and compromised by worldly ambitions are the good Dr. Lewin, evil Parson Brand and nameless but time-serving Archdeacon in Richardson’s *Clarissa* — (all figures developed, as Weinbrot has well argued, in a Menippean satire<sup>37</sup>), nonetheless in the churches where Clarissa worships so frequently during her last weeks, clergymen humbly serve the spiritual needs of their parishioners. Frye writes of Henry Fielding’s Thwackum and Square that they “have Menippean blood in them,”<sup>38</sup> but this is

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33 ODC I, xxi.

34 AC 307.

35 AC 308.

36 AC 309.

37 This is Weinbrot’s example of his fourth type, the Menippean incursion (*Menippean Satire Reconsidered* 275-95).

38 *Ibid.*



true only while they run parallel courses. When Square undergoes a conversion and ceases to act as a predictable caricature, when he sits down at his desk and writes to Allworthy of Tom Jones's innocence, he acts for the first time fully as a man because he acts for the first time as a Christian. Skelton's practice of prose forms in *Ophiomaches* helps us to understand this change.

There is an irony in Skelton's literary model of relations between gentlemen, in that Skelton represents and tests (in an English context) a sociability that he would not find once installed, shortly after publishing *Ophiomaches*, in his own parish in Donegal. There, as he complained to Richardson, he lived among 'the most ignorant and barbarous of his majesty's subjects . . . where . . . [not] even a single conversable acquaintance is to be found.'<sup>39</sup> Nor was Skelton especially adept at social relations. While he was in London during the publication of *Ophiomaches*, he won considerable acclaim as a preacher. But he later declined to take up Richardson's suggestion that he write in support of the Bishop of London, Thomas Sherlock, against Conyers Middleton's attack on Sherlock's *The Use and Intent of Prophecy* (1750), as to do so might lead to an appointment in London.<sup>40</sup> When Sherlock himself told Skelton that if he would write a work of popular morality he would promote him in his diocese, Skelton asked ineptly 'what objection he had to the *old Whole Duty of Man*?' Skelton did care deeply for the people of his parish. When many of them, especially the poor Irish Catholics, were starving in the harsh winter of 1757, he gave his ready money, then sold his books to buy them food.<sup>41</sup> A moment's reflection will suggest how extraordinary an act this was. As David Berman has persuasively argued, the Irish Counter-Enlightenment in which Skelton can be located was motivated largely by the need to defend Anglican ascendancy against Catholics and Presbyterians.<sup>42</sup> No sense of earthly solidarity with the people of his parish can have motivated Skelton's action: it was an act of charity, performed in simple obedience to the gospel command to feed the hungry. In rejecting Mr. Templeton's most enticing overtures, Mr. Shepherd keeps himself from any social arrangement that might restrain him from such charity. In performing such charity, Skelton completed his own argument for a social value higher than politeness.

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39 Letter of 5 March 1751 in *Correspondence of Samuel Richardson* V, 202-3.

40 Letter of 10 February 1750 in *Correspondence of Samuel Richardson* V, 199.

41 LPS 107, 131-5.

42 Berman, 266-7.

Skelton also completes the lesson he had been teaching as ecclesiastical satirist. By contrast with some earlier, slighter and more single-mindedly satirical works, in which he creates a single persona and his authorial use of it is always transparent, in *Ophiomaches* Skelton's satirical method is more fully dramatic. His skeptic Dechaine dramatizes the intellectual superficiality and interpersonal nastiness that Skelton believes characterize deism. His clerical sycophant Cunningham and his ingenuous young man Templeton do not simply stand for attitudes attributed to them, but express themselves in characteristic speech. In the course of Skelton's dialogues, the broad anticlerical satire of the deist and the earnest responses of the orthodox Shepherd — occasionally leavened with ironic sallies of his own — contextualize each other, effecting a serious testing of ideas. In his resolution of the dialogues, Skelton acknowledges that he is not a disinterested observer, but an active participant, one with responsibilities he must meet and interests he must admit. The ecclesiastical satirist's self-criticism and self-questioning energize the work and testify to the contradictory desires of flesh and spirit. It is remarkable that Skelton, committed uncompromisingly to a "fundamental" Christianity as the only alternative to skepticism, should acknowledge so much as he does the temptations of a comfortable but potentially complacent clerical existence, that he should develop so extensive and witty an anticlerical voice, and that he should create a sociable relation between genteel patron and clerical client, yet allow the clergyman no benefits, however innocent, that might compromise his independence or his integrity.

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