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978-1-009-16038-4 — Parodies, Hoaxes, Mock Treatises
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A MEDITATION UPON A BROOM-STICK

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Headnote

Published 1710; copy text *1735* (see Textual Account).

The earliest account of the origins of 'A Meditation upon a Broom-stick' comes from George Faulkner's 'Some Further Account of Dr. Swift', printed in 1762 in vol. XI of his *Works*, and reprinted with commentary by Barry Slepian:

> When Lord *Berkely*, one of the Lords Justices of *Ireland*, was in that Kingdom, to whom Dr. *Swift* was Chaplain, Lady *Betty Berkely* his Daughter, was very fond of reading the great Mr. *Boyle's* Meditations, and frequently desired Mr. *Swift* to read to her; but, being one Time interrupted by Company, he stopped, and my Lady desired him to fold down the Leaf where he left off: Next Day her Ladyship requested him to read to her again, when he began with the Meditation on a Broomstick, which pleased her so extremely well, that she ran on in the highest Raptures on Mr. *Boyle*, who could write so religiously on a Broomstick. But, Lady *Betty* opening the Book some Time after, found the Meditation on the Broomstick, in Mr. *Swift's* Hand Writing, and stuck in at the Place where he had been reading. This had the desired Effect, as Mr. *Swift* never was called upon again to read to her Ladyship.[1]

A more elaborate account was given by Thomas Sheridan in his edition of the *Works*; and although lengthy, it is worth quoting in full:

> In the yearly visits which he made to London, during his stay there, he passed much of his time at Lord Berkeley's, officiating as Chaplain to the family, and attending Lady Berkeley in her private devotions. The Countess had at this time taken a great liking to Mr. Boyle's Meditations, and was determined to go through them in that manner; but as Swift had by no means the same relish for that kind of writing which her Ladyship had, he soon grew weary of the task; and a whim coming into his head, resolved to get rid of it in a way which might occasion some sport in the family; for which they had as high a relish as himself. The next time he was employed in reading one of these Meditations, he took an opportunity of conveying away the book, and dexterously inserted a leaf, on which he had written his own Meditation on a Broomstick; after which, he took care to have the book restored to its proper place, and in his next attendance on my Lady, when he was desired to proceed to the next Meditation, Swift

1 Slepian, 'Some Forgotten Anecdotes', 36.

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opened the place where the leaf had been inserted, and with great composure of countenance read the title, 'A Meditation on a Broom-stick.' Lady Berkeley, a little surprised at the oddity of the title, stopped him, repeating the words, 'A Meditation on a Broom-stick! Bless me, what a strange subject! But there is no knowing what useful lessons of instruction this wonderful man may draw from things apparently the most trivial. Pray let us hear what he says upon it.' Swift then, with an inflexible gravity of countenance, proceeded to read the Meditation, in the same solemn tone which he had used in delivering the former. Lady Berkeley, not at all suspecting a trick, in the fullness of her prepossession, was every now and then, during the reading of it, expressing her admiration of this extraordinary man, who could draw such fine moral reflections from so contemptible a subject; with which, though Swift must have been inwardly not a little tickled, yet he preserved a most perfect composure of features, so that she had not the least room to suspect any deceit. Soon after, some company coming in, Swift pretended business, and withdrew, foreseeing what was to follow. Lady Berkeley, full of the subject, soon entered upon the praises of those heavenly Meditations of Mr. Boyle. 'But', said she, 'the doctor has just been reading one to me, which has surprised me more than all the rest.' One of the company asked which of the Meditations she meant. She answered directly, in the simplicity of her heart, 'I mean, that excellent Meditation on a Broom-stick.' The company looked at each other with some surprise, and could scarce refrain from laughing. But they all agreed that they had never heard of such a Meditation before. 'Upon my word', said my lady, 'there it is, look into that book, and convince yourselves.' One of them opened the book and found it there indeed, but in Swift's handwriting; upon which a general burst of laughter ensued; and my Lady, when the first surprise was over, enjoyed the joke as much as any of them; saying, what a vile trick has that rogue played me! But it is his way, he never baulks his humour in any thing. The affair ended in a great deal of harmless mirth, and Swift, you may be sure, was not asked to proceed any farther in the Meditations. Thus we see that his original intention in writing this piece, was not to ridicule the great Robert Boyle, but only to furnish occasion for a great deal of innocent mirth on Lady Berkeley's enthusiasm, and simplicity of heart; and at the same time to get rid of the disagreeable task of reading to her writings which were not at all to his taste. And that it afterwards got out into the world, was owing to the eagerness of those who were acquainted with the Berkeley family, to procure copies of a piece of such exquisite humour.[2]

2 *The Works of the Rev. Dr. Jonathan Swift*, ed. Thomas Sheridan, 17 vols., London, 1784, vol. I, pp. 42–5.

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Sheridan then notes: 'This anecdote came from Lady Betty Germaine, daughter of Lady Berkeley, and was communicated to me by the late Lady Lambert, an intimate of Lady Betty's.' Faulkner and Sheridan, though differing about the location, agree in presenting the piece as a hoax whose victim was one or other of the Berkeley ladies, whom Swift knew in his capacity of domestic chaplain to Charles Berkeley (1649–1710), second Earl of Berkeley, who had in 1699 been appointed Lord Justice of Ireland.[3] Dating is complicated by the conflicting claims about location: the piece was described as 'Written *August*, 1704' in 1711 and 1713, but subsequently appeared without a date until in 1735 it was presented as 'Written in the YEAR 1703' (see Textual Account). Davis, citing only Sheridan's account, proposes 1702, when Swift made a summer visit to Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire.[4] He notes not only resemblances to the second section of the *Tale* (see below), but also the likelihood of a shared context with 'A Ballad on the Game of Traffic'.[5] If, as Williams suggests, the 'Ballad' was composed during Swift's 1702 visit to Berkeley Castle, and not, as Faulkner claimed, at Dublin Castle, it may be that he was similarly mistaken about the 'Meditation'.[6] Whatever the precise date, this is clearly one of the earliest pieces in the present volume.

Faulkner and Sheridan also differ as to the identity of the victim. Faulkner identifies her as Swift's lifelong friend Lady Betty Berkeley, later Germain, who would have been in her early twenties at this time.[7] Sheridan, on the other hand, specifies Lady Betty as the source of the anecdote, and her mother, Elizabeth, Countess of Berkeley, as its subject. The latter is the more plausibly represented as devotee of such an old-fashioned style of piety (cf. Sheridan's reference to her 'enthusiasm, and simplicity of heart'): in 1709 Swift would dedicate to her his *Project for the Advancement of Religion*; and Lady Betty herself would later reflect that 'I dont just take the turn my Mother did of fasting and praying.'[8] The Countess had married into a family with a particularly close connection to Boyle and his meditations.[9] Her husband's father, George, first Earl of Berkeley (1626/7–98), had sought spiritual advice from Boyle's sister, Mary Rich (1624–78), Countess of Warwick, who enjoyed a considerable reputation for her own occasional

3 Irvin Ehrenpreis, *Swift: The Man, His Works, and the Age*, 3 vols., London: Methuen, 1962–83, vol. II, pp. 2, 5–15.
4 Davis, vol. I, p. xxxiv; cf. Ehrenpreis, vol. II, pp. 90–1.
5 For further reflection on the relation between the 'Meditation' and the *Tale*, see Maurice Johnson, 'A Note on Swift's *Meditation upon a Broom-Stick* and *A Tale of a Tub*', *Library Chronicle* 37 (1971), 136–42.
6 Williams, *Poems*, vol. I, pp. 74–7.
7 Ibid., p. 76.
8 Cf. Berkeley's letter to Swift of 22 April 1709 (*Corr*, vol. I, pp. 252–3), and see Lady Betty's of 23 February 1731 (*Corr*, vol. III, p. 365).
9 Coolahan, 'Redeeming Parcels of Time', 131 and n. 45, 136.

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meditations; and her recommendation of the practice led him ultimately to publish a collection of his own, *Historical Applications and Occasional Meditations upon Several Subjects. Written by a Person of Honour* (1666).

The textual transmission of Swift's 'Meditation' is unusually explicit about the object of parody. The Honourable Robert Boyle (1627–91), best known today as a scientist, was also a celebrated devotional writer; and in his *Occasional Reflections* (1665) he had revisited a mode of piety that had been widespread in the earlier seventeenth century. Based in analogical habits of thought, it had clear connections both to the emblem tradition and to the devotional application of natural and domestic imagery in seventeenth-century religious verse. Occasional meditations (so called in contrast with formal schemes of structured meditation at set times) were seen as offering a way of redeeming time from the demands of ordinary business: these devotions took the objects and events of everyday life not as obstacles to spiritual discipline, but as the raw material for a kind of reflection that could be carried on even amid ordinary tasks.[10] As a late contribution to the tradition, Boyle's *Occasional Reflections* had been greeted with ridicule by the wits even at the time of their first publication; and by the beginning of the eighteenth century, the genre's vogue was well past.[11] Indeed, the mistake of the copyist of SwJ 439 about Boyle's first name may also suggest how fast his *Occasional Reflections* were losing currency in elite circles (see Textual Account for confusion with the politician Henry Boyle). Orrery, however, who was Boyle's kinsman, would later expostulate indignantly against Swift's satire: 'To what a height must the spirit of sarcasm arise in an author, who could prevail upon himself to ridicule so good a man as Mr. BOYLE?', and this response was to set the agenda for other accounts, notably that by Sheridan quoted above, which declares its aim as being to 'exonerate Swift from the charge'.[12] Deane Swift, however, while conceding the impropriety of Swift's 'unmerciful stroke' against 'so good a man', showed his low estimation of the genre when he argued that as Swift was at this time 'rising into the high noon of life, judgement, and abilities', he 'consequently must have held in utter contempt all kinds of meditations, whether written by that person whom he derides, or by the greatest genius in *England*; that sort of scribbling above all other being in truth the most impertinently ridiculous'.[13] He comments further on 'the style and cant of an author, whose meditations were I suppose in the hands of twenty or thirty old women, and perhaps some

10 For contextualisation, see ibid.
11 Michael Hunter, *Robert Boyle, 1627–1691: Scrupulosity and Science*, Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2000, p. 239; Greg Lynall, '"Talking Flowers and Topsy-turvy Trees": Swift, Shadwell, and Robert Boyle's *Occasional Reflections upon Several Subjects*', *SStud* 26 (2011), 7–21.
12 Orrery, *Remarks*, p. 145.
13 Deane Swift, *Essay*, pp. 125–6.

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other hypocondriacal people in those times'.[14] The association with old women is telling, and recalls the devotional head-shaking over the human condition that Swift would ascribe to the 'grave elderly Gentlewoman' appointed as Glumdalclich's governess in *GT*: 'The Book treats of the Weakness of Human kind; and is in little Esteem except among Women and the Vulgar . . . This Writer went through all the usual Topicks of *European* Moralists; shewing how diminutive, contemptible, and helpless an Animal was Man.'[15]

One likely factor in Swift's evident distaste for the occasional meditation was the encouragement that it offered to even the humblest and least qualified writers. It had developed from a private devotional practice, recorded for future edification and as evidence of time redeemed, into a published genre that stressed the exemplary role of the printed collection as model for others to follow. It also had a particular link to Puritan and low-church piety, and was routinely recommended to those whom Richard Baxter would designate, in a congratulatory letter to Boyle cited by Coolahan, as 'women & weake persons'.[16] While Pope would write of the epic in his '*Receipt to make an* Epic Poem' that ''tis easily brought about by him that has a *Genius*, but the skill lies in doing it without one', a comparable recipe or pattern-book was in effect being offered, if at a lower level of literary ambition, by collections of occasional meditations.[17] Indeed, the tradition of the occasional meditation even had its own parallel to Swift's contrast between the bee and the spider: Boyle compared the practitioner of occasional meditation to the bee, who 'does not only gather, but improve and transform, her food, and live on that which otherwise would be useless', in contrast with those dependent on 'Instructions in Books of Morality and Devotion', whom he likens to 'an Ant that contributes nothing either to the Production or Improvement of the Corn she lays up and feeds on'.[18]

14 Ibid., p. 125.
15 Part II, ch. VII, Davis, vol. II, p. 137.
16 Coolahan, 'Redeeming Parcels of Time', 129–31; Robert Boyle, *The Correspondence of Robert Boyle*, ed. Michael Hunter, Antonio Clericuzio and Lawrence M. Principe, 6 vols., London: Pickering & Chatto, 2001, vol. IV, p. 476; and, for further gender implications of such objects of contemplation, cf. Kristin M. Girten, 'Unsexed Souls: Natural Philosophy as Transformation in Eliza Haywood's *Female Spectator*', *ECS* 43 (2009), 55–74.
17 *Peri Bathous*, ch. xv: Alexander Pope, *The Prose Works of Alexander Pope*, ed. Norman Ault and Rosemary Cowler, 2 vols., Oxford: Blackwell, 1936–86, vol. II, p. 28.
18 Coolahan, 'Redeeming Parcels of Time', 132–3; Boyle, *Works*, vol. V, p. 28; 'Battel', *CWJS*, vol. I, pp. 149–51, and commentary, pp. 474–6, particularly p. 476, citing a further use by Boyle of the image of the spider to condemn indifference to scientific enquiry: the spider, who is happy catching flies in a corner of the palace, is likened to those 'content with the superficial account given us of things by their obvious Appearances and Qualities' who refuse to explore 'this magnificent Structure, call'd the Universe' (*Some Considerations Touching the Usefulness of Experimental Natural Philosophy. The First Part*: Boyle, *Works*, vol. III, pp. 204–5).

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Coolahan has also argued that Boyle self-consciously presented himself as an innovator, going out of his way to emphasise the scope that the genre offered to the poorly educated and to women, and suggesting how its techniques might be extended to themes beyond the devotional; and by doing so he placed himself squarely in range of Swift's anti-modern satire.[19] He had explicitly suggested that 'the nature of this kind of Composures requires not any other than a loose and Desultory way of writing', and he had even included 'some few Meditations, of a more familiar sort, & easier to be lighted on; to keep those from being discourag'd, from trying to make Occasional Reflections, who may chance to have either Barrenner Fancy's, or more unpractis'd Pens'.[20] His commendation of occasional meditation on the grounds that it 'may afford men the opportunitys, of saying the Hansomest things they know, on several Subjects, without saying any thing Else of them, or filling above a *Sheet*, or perhaps a *Side* of Paper at a Time' may indeed have conjured, for Swift, a vision of degenerate late humanist commonplacing like the efforts of the projector of 'A Tritical Essay' – or even the interminable recombination of inconsequential snippets that Simon Wagstaff will recommend, more than thirty years later, to aspirants to the art of polite conversation.[21]

In his copy of Gilbert Burnet's *History of his Own Times* (1724–34), Swift would later record his opinion of Robert Boyle as 'a very silly writer'.[22] Burnet's praise for Boyle's selfless pursuit of scientific experiment underlines the fact that Boyle, though firmly committed to the Church of England, was closely associated with clergy and causes despised by Swift. His intense and scrupulous piety, dating from a youthful conversion experience, could hardly have differed more from the temper of Swift's attachment to the established Church; he relied particularly on Burnet for spiritual advice (and Burnet preached his funeral sermon); and the lectures in Christian apologetics founded under his will were inaugurated in 1692 by Richard Bentley, leader of the attack on Swift's patron Temple in the Phalaris affair.[23] Boyle's lavish charitable donations, motivated in part by unease about impropriated Church lands in Ireland awarded to him at the Restoration, included support for the Huguenots whose arrival in England Swift regarded with such suspicion.[24]

Boyle was also a man of noble birth (related not only to Orrery, but also to Charles Boyle, champion of the Ancients in the Phalaris affair) who had arguably lowered himself in Swift's eyes by his scientific enthusiasms. He had played a founding role in the Royal Society, on which the Dublin Philosophical Society partly modelled itself, thus associating himself with innovations in

19 Coolahan, 'Redeeming Parcels of Time', 133–6.
20 Boyle, *Works*, vol. V, p. 9.
21 Coolahan, 'Redeeming Parcels of Time', 134; Boyle, *Works*, vol. V, pp. 10–11.
22 Davis, vol. V, p. 271.
23 Hunter, *Scrupulosity and Science*, pp. 1, 4–5, 13, 57, 72–92.
24 Ibid., p. 83.

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natural philosophy that Swift had despised since his student days in Dublin.[25] Ehrenpreis comments: 'Robert Boyle, measuring the elasticity of air, may feel contempt for a mad astrologer; but to a man convinced that moral philosophy is the only kind worth studying, the virtuoso seems as foolish as the quack.'[26] Indeed, Boyle's scientific interests, far from being set aside when he turns to devotion, are explicitly invoked in his occasional meditations.[27] Finally, his standing in Swift's eyes could only have been further damaged by the fact that the writing of his biography was taken on (if not completed), by Burnet's protégé William Wotton (1666–1727), whose *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1694) and responses to the *Tale* had already made him a key exhibit in Swift's campaign against the moderns.[28]

Any comparison of the 'Meditation' with its supposed exemplars in Boyle's collection soon comes up against the realisation that it is not as straightforward a hoax as the familiar wording of the 1735 title ('According to the Style and Manner of the Honourable Robert Boyle's Meditations') may suggest. Identifying meditations in Boyle's collection that resemble Swift's hoax in topic, length and tone, for example, is not easy. His topics are in fact extremely varied, and by no means restricted to domestic objects like Swift's broomstick: they are much more commonly prompted by an action or event than by an object, e.g. '*Upon his manner of giving Meat to his Dogg*', '*Upon two very miserable Beggars, begging together by the High-way*', '*Upon the Quenching of Quick-lime*', '*Upon the first Audience of the* Russian *Extraordinary Embassadour, at which he made his Emperor's Presents*'. Most, unlike Swift's parody, focus on a specifically devotional analogy; and examples of moralising that is not explicitly religious are relatively few (e.g. '*Upon the sight of Sweet-meats, very artificially counterfeited in Wax*').[29] Whatever success Swift may have had in imposing on the credulity of an unsuspecting devotee, the 'Style and Manner' of the 'Meditation' is more obviously parodic than imitative. Moore, in a detailed argument for the centrality of formal and thematic parody to the piece, draws less on the scale and structure of individual meditations than on allusions and techniques to be found across the collection as a whole, including its extensive paratexts: she cites Boyle's introductory reference to having been 'prevail'd with to bundle up these loose sticks into Faggots', and his appeal, in his prefatory Discourse, to the sight of 'the Gardener pruning a Fruit-tree'.[30] In this reading, specific allusions show Swift as plausibly indignant both at Boyle's unorthodox

25 Ehrenpreis, vol. I, pp. 46–55, 78–88; for Boyle's work on the vacuum, see 'Tritical Essay', p. 30 below.
26 Ehrenpreis, vol. I, p. 197.
27 Girten, 'Unsexed Souls', 63–4.
28 Hunter, *Scrupulosity and Science*, pp. 258–6.
29 Boyle, *Works*, vol. V, p. 169.
30 Leslie Moore, '"Instructive Trees": Swift's *Broom-stick*, Boyle's *Reflections*, and Satiric Figurations', *ECS* 19 (1986), 313–32; Boyle, *Works*, vol. V, pp. 45–7.

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reading of the image of the vine and the husbandman in John 15, and at his wider project of linking science and devotion. Lynall further contextualises Swift's disapproval by adducing classical topoi not only on upright posture as the distinctive mark of human dignity, but also on the human form as a kind of inverted plant, offering an even wider context for bringing into question Boyle's enthusiasm for the supposed capacity of 'an Ingenious Man to pry into the innermost Recesses of mysterious Nature', which Swift transposes, in mortally dusty terms, into an accusation of raking into 'every Slut's Corner of Nature' and of 'sharing deeply all the while in the very same Pollutions he pretends to sweep away'.[31] This orthodox emphasis on the human inheritance of dust accords with Swift's disdain for Joseph Glanvill, another user of the inverted plant image, and one hopeful of ameliorating the consequences of the fall through virtuoso aspiration.[32]

In fact, the linking of the inverted tree to the degradation of the human condition links Swift's parody with a far older tradition of devout ascesticism, going back to the *De miseria humane conditionis* of Lotario dei Segni (*c.* 1161–1216), Pope Innocent III. One of the earliest identifications of a substantive parallel with Swift's 'Meditation', Clarence M. Webster's 1936 'A Source for Swift's *A Meditation upon a Broom-Stick*', cites George Gascoigne's *The Droome of Doomes Day* (1576); but this is in fact a translation of *De miseria*, the relevant passage being taken from Book I, ch. 8, 'Qualem fructum homo producit' ('What sort of fruit man produces').[33] Gascoigne follows his source closely, comparing the wholesome produce of trees with the 'nitts, lyse & worms . . . spettle, pisse, and ordure' produced by human beings:

> Then what is man (according to his shape and proporcion) but a tree turned topsie turuey? Whose roots are his heares, the stub of the roote is his head and his neck, the body of the tree, is his breast, belly, and bulke, the boughes are his armes & legges, and the little braunches and leaves, are his fingers and toes.

Another line of allusion, traceable through the image of broom and dust, links Swift's parody to such apprehensions of sin and damnation as 'On a Broom', from Nicholas Billingsley's *A Treasury of Divine Raptures* (1667), where it takes its place in an alphabetically arranged sequence of brief reflections ranging from topics of Christian doctrine to allegories on everyday objects and events:

31 Lynall, 'Talking Flowers and Topsy-turvy Trees'; A. B. Chambers, '"I was but an Inverted Tree": Notes Towards the History of an Idea', *SRen* 8 (1961), 291–9; Boyle, *Works*, vol. V, p. 34.
32 Lynall, 'Talking Flowers and Topsy-turvy Trees'; *Corr*, vol. I, pp. 137–9 (13 January 1699).
33 Lotharius Cardinalis, *De miseria humane conditionis*, ed. Michele Maccarrone, Lucca: Societas Thesauri Mundi, 1955, pp. 14–15.

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How necessary is the Houswifes broom,
To sweep out dust that genders in the room!
But oh! the besome of *Jehovahs* ire
Sweeps dusty souls, into infernal fire.[34]

In contrast, Swift's 'Meditation' avoids explicit doctrinal interpretation, reflecting on earthly pitfalls and misfortunes, but not going so far as to sport with the last things (death, judgement, heaven and hell).

Beyond this wider connection to older ascetic traditions, Swift also extends his reach into the ribaldry of Restoration drama. A case in point is the disrespect for old age expressed by Thersites to Nestor in Dryden's *Troilus and Cressida* (1679):

Thersites
But hang thee first, thou very reverend fool!
Thou sapless Oke, that liv'st by wanting thought.
And now in thy three hundreth year repin'st
Thou should'st be fell'd: hanging's a civil death,
The death of men: thou canst not hang: thy trunk
Is only fit for gallows to hang others.
Nestor
A fine greeting.
Thersites
A fine old Dotard, to repine at hanging
At such an Age! what saw the Gods in thee
That a Cock-Sparrow shou'd but live three years,
And thou shoud'st last three Ages! he's thy better;
He uses life: he treads himself to death.
Thou hast forgot thy use some hundred years:
Thou stump of Man, thou worn-out broom: thou lumber.[35]

In a more general sense, indeed, the preposterously applied analogies elaborated in 'A Meditation' also recall the wider satire of mechanically applied analogical thinking worked out in the *Tale*, in the belief system of those who conceived 'the Universe to be a large *Suit of Cloaths*':

Proceed to the particular Works of the Creation, you will find how curious *Journey-man* Nature hath been, to trim up the *vegetable* Beaux: Observe how sparkish a Perewig adorns the Head of a *Beech*, and what a fine Doublet of white Satin is worn by the *Birch.* To conclude from all, what is

34 Nicholas Billingsley, *A Treasury of Divine Raptures*, London, 1667, p. 78.
35 Dryden, *Troilus and Cressida*, p. 20.

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