C. The Parliament Fart (1607-)

When Sir John Croke came to read his message from the Lords to the Commons on 4 March 1607, during debates on the naturalization of the Scots (the *post nati*), Henry Ludlow famously farted. At the time, Robert Bowyer noted in his diary that the fart emanated from "the nether end of the House...whereat the Company laughing the Messenger was almost out of Countenance". He added, however, that it was not done in disgrace since his father, Sir Edward, had also farted during a committee meeting: "So this seemeth Infirmity Naturall, not Malice" (213, n. 1). This event occasioned one of the most popular comic political poems of the early Stuart era, which was still in circulation in the latter half of the seventeenth century. "The Parliament Fart" also proved to be one of the most malleable poems of the period. Couplets were introduced during or after the 1610 and 1614 Parliaments, and numerous variants were circulated during subsequent parliaments in the 1620s. In different manuscript sources, the poem ranges in length from around forty lines to over 225 lines, and couplets refer to at least 113 members of parliament (MPs), of whom approximately 112 sat in James's first Parliament (in session from 1604 to 1610). (Indeed, given that many of these MPs were dead by 1622, the poem's popularity in the 1620s is remarkable.) Although it almost invariably opens with the same ten or twelve lines, there is no particular order to subsequent couplets; rather, much of the poem's popularity appears to have arisen out of its loose, improvisational structure, enabling copyists to personalize their own copies.

Authorship is occasionally attributed to John Hoskyns; however, it was almost certainly a collaborative venture. One source, perhaps most authoritatively, ascribes the poem to a group of wits, Richard Martin, Hoskyns, Christopher Brooke and a "Ned Jones", most probably Edward Jones, a close friend of John Donne and Martin (BL Add. MS 23229, fol. 17v). This attribution invites comparison with another poem celebrating a gathering at the Mitre tavern, c.1611, at which these men were present, the "Convivium Philosophicum" or "Banquet of Wits".[1] Moreover, a copy of a ballad in the Conway papers is listed to be sung "to the tune of downe came grave auntient Sergeant Crooke"—a further indication that "The Parliament Fart" itself (to which this note refers) may have been performed at tavern gatherings, or similar occasions (BL Add. MS 23229, fol. 19v). The majority of the Wits were members of the Inns of Court, one of

the centres of early modern literary culture in England. Inns of Court students, such as John Donne, John Marston, John Davies, and Everard Guilpin, were the authors of the vast majority of satires written at the end of the sixteenth century. The “Parliament Fart” is a continuation of this culture.

Fundamentally, the poem is a piece of extempore wit, an extended fart joke. That said, couplets are also often topical, referring to key issues and debates in James’s first Parliament: the Union (of England and Scotland), purveyance (the right of the royal household to buy goods at less than market value), impositions (taxes on imported or exported goods levied without the consent of parliament), the authority of the common law, parliamentary liberties, and freedom of speech. Couplets added in subsequent years, meanwhile, address issues from the Overbury scandal to the 1624 monopolies bill. The poem’s characteristics of wit and parody invite comparison with the law sports of the Inns of Court Christmas revels; in both cases, parody relies on a heightened awareness of the codes and conventions that define an institution. Hence the deliberation on the fart by the assembled House arguably speaks to the institutional self-confidence of the Commons: it could be read as a brazen challenge to the Crown’s ability to manage the Commons, while the metaphor of the body politic humorously confers on the Lower House the central regulatory authority in maintaining the health of the commonwealth. Of course, “The Parliament Fart” was also open to alternative readings, particularly after 1649, when a flatulent Commons could stand for a headless government. The poem’s witty combination of liberty and licence led to its inclusion in the Restoration printed miscellanies, and it was thereby available as a precursor for the libertine wit of the 1660s.

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* The source for the following biographies and direct quotations, unless otherwise stated, is the History of Parliament Trust, London, 1604-1629 section, unpublished articles. Michelle O’Callaghan is grateful to the History of Parliament Trust for allowing her to see these articles in draft, and for the assistance of Dr. Andrew Thrush at the Trust.

[1] Though it was written in Latin, this poem was also translated into English, probably by John Reynolds (BL MS Harley 4931, p. 22).