

## K. “Fortune’s wheel”: Reflections on the Jacobean Era

The poems in this section are unusual in the context of this edition, and in many respects stretch the generic category of “libel”. Both are relatively long—the first just under 500 lines—and unfocused. Moreover, they lack the personal vitriol that we generally associate with the libel, just as they lack the epigrammatic form which the libel most commonly adopts. Indeed it is significant that the second of the two is labelled “A Satire”, since it attempts to apply the practices and structures of Elizabethan verse satire, rather than those of the libel, to the representation of Jacobean politics. Given these points of difference, it is perhaps significant that both poems exist only in one (and the same) manuscript. Hence these poems did not achieve anything like the wide circulation enjoyed by many early Stuart libels; in fact, given their length and the associated difficulties involved in dissemination, we might fairly assume that this was never the intention of their respective authors.

Yet these points of difference also make the poems particularly interesting. Unlike most other libels, these poems have a sense of history unfolding across a period of years, and as a result offer valuable reflections on the notable developments of the Jacobean era. Not only do they plot the era’s spectacular rises and falls, they also attempt to make sense of these facts of history: invoking codes of morality and speculating on matters of political causation. The first of the poems, “Fortunes wheele. or Rota fortunæ in gyro”, is particularly interesting in this regard. Here, the complex machinations of Jacobean politics consistently frustrate any efforts to derive order and structure out of the facts of history. The neat medieval model of the wheel of fortune is simply inadequate as an explanatory tool. And the poet seems well aware of this; indeed the poem combines discourses of sin and anti-Catholicism with a consistently knowing and ironic tone.