ABSTRACT
INQUIRY AND PROVOCATION:
THE USE OF AMBIGUITY
IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH POLITICAL SATIRE

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Marquette University, 2020

Nearly all literary theories for a millennium have defined satire according to its linguistic clarity and moral certainty. Not until recently have theorists such as Dustin Griffin recognized that satire often comprises an ambiguity that moves it beyond the mere policing of established moral boundaries. This project considers how four sixteenth-century satirists—Thomas Wyatt, George Gascoigne, Thomas Deloney, and Thomas Nashe—exploited satire’s capacity for open-ended inquiry to address the rapid political and economic changes that typified the early modern period. Rather than relying on established moral codes to domesticate uncertainty, these writers used satire to explore and analyze government bureaucratization, the nature of commonwealth, the generation of Crown revenue through the granting of monopolies, and the transition from a patronage to a market economy. Satire’s often overlooked ambiguity allowed these writers to engage these political and economic issues in ways beyond the dogmatic and tentatively to posit responses to contingencies at a time when received wisdom proved inadequate. The conclusion of my project is two-fold: Historically, it reveals English satire of the period to be of a greater complexity and nuance than hereto recognized, attributes ideally suited to the political and economic flux of early modern England. Generically, it highlights the functional and constructive ambiguity of a literary mode too often seen, even by modern theorists, as clear-cut in its moral underpinnings and disruptive in its methods.