

Mid-Range Reading Marvell

An Experiment in Resolving Ambiguity in “An Horatian Ode”

Introduction

Complexity is a hallmark of Andrew Marvell’s poetry and life. One of his poems from the 1650s, “An Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland,” continues to puzzle Early Modern literary scholars. The current assessment is that this poem contains “layer upon layer” of “ambiguity” (Worden 172), is “multivalent” (Post, 2002), possibly “[c]overtly royalist, double; Machiavellian” (Smith 271-2), and “confusing for its political ambivalence” (Smith 270). Is that answer satisfying: is “Horatian Ode” simply ambiguous, confusing, and ambivalent? Or, is there context we are missing that would lend weight to a more specific close reading?

In this paper, we use distant reading to resolve this ambiguity. One central, but ambiguous, image in “Horatian Ode” is a youth leaving his education for Cromwell’s war. Today, we can read this image as either heroic devotion to nation-building, or needless suffering imposed by an authoritarian leader. What would Marvell’s contemporaries have thought of it? We use topic modeling to place “Horatian Ode” in the context of other authors writing in English in the first half of the seventeenth century. Our analysis shows that many of these authors identify a necessary relationship between education and a student’s happiness; however, in Marvell’s poem, it is Cromwell who is unhappy, and who compels youth to forsake education for

war to satisfy Cromwell's ambitions. Examining our larger context shows that, far from being ambivalent, "Horatian Ode" expresses a subtle, but clear, critique of Cromwell.

Background

In the Early Modern period, education was seen as a vehicle for providing crucial training for future leaders. One of the most well-known works on education at this time was John Milton's "Of Education" (1642). Milton and Marvell were both tutors; Marvell was a tutor to Cromwell's ward, William Dutton. In January 1651, Cromwell was elected Chancellor of the University of Oxford, which put him in an intermediary role between the government and the university. (Worden, 2012, 91-193).

One scholar, Matthew Harkins, has also identified this connection to "An Horatian Ode," reading "Horatian Ode" in the context of John Milton's "Of Education;" however, Harkins argues that the youth in the poem is a foil for Cromwell, and emphasizes Cromwell's maturity. We agree with Harkins that "Of Education" is a useful context in which to read the "Horatian Ode;" however, we argue that a close reading of "Of Education" and "Horatian Ode" together leads to the conclusion that Marvell presents Cromwell's leadership in "Horatian Ode" as dangerously militaristic. The "Horatian Ode" is about Cromwell manipulating ideas about youth through "arts" to gain "pow'r." Both "Of Education" and "Horatian Ode" make a connection between happiness and education; Marvell specifically portrays Cromwell as "austere" and "sad." Seen through this lens, "Horatian Ode's" attitude toward Cromwell's leadership is not ambiguous: it sounds an alarm about his ambition.

“Of Education,” however, is a single text. Could Marvell have counted on his contemporary readers to see “Horatian Ode” as a warning? If we find that other Renaissance writers in English connect happiness and education, could this larger context, this larger dataset, tell us anything further about Marvell’s opinion of Cromwell in “Horatian Ode?”

Methodology

Our methodology is closest to what Alison Booth describes as “mid-range reading,” or “slow reading” because of the time involved in the methodology (Booth, 2017): collaboratively using digital tools to perform a distant reading that then informs a specific close reading. Following Booth, we present our project here as a case study. Since many approaches are available, we too are performing tests to determine an appropriate tool that will yield useful results for our specific humanistic questions.

We wanted to test the idea that “Horatian Ode” was not ambiguous if we could identify an appropriate larger textual context to close read it against. We used topic modeling to help us identify such a context through distant reading. We believed our distant reading would help us further focus our close reading. A vast body of literature exists on topic modeling in the humanities (Jockers and Mimno, 2013; Blevins, 2010; Goldstone, 2013; Goodwin, 2013). In brief, topic modeling is an automated method for extracting clusters of related words from documents. The clusters are based on how frequently those words occur together in the same document, and are discovered using statistical methods that do not know anything about the language or content of the documents.

For our purposes, we gathered a corpus of 102 texts on education from the Early English Books Online (EEBO) database. These texts were all written in English between 1600-1660. We compiled our specific set of texts by searching for texts that included the words “education” or “learning,” plus texts written by a few important figures such as Marvell, Milton, and Nedham. We cleaned all of the texts by manually removing EEBO’s standard headers and footers. We then performed topic modeling using MALLET (McCallum, 2002). We removed stopwords using MALLET’s English stopword list, supplemented with about 80 extra words common in Renaissance English. We tried different numbers of topics, but settled on 40 because topics in this set were both coherent and unique. We used the default alpha and beta settings as experimenting with different settings for those parameters changed our results little.

Results

Topic Number	Top Words	Our interpretation
11	church god christ people apostles men ministers government word	Church administration
13	learning latine english good schooles grammar word vse booke learned	Education
22	men good love riches heavenly honour divine god thinke glory heaven happy joy happinesse drinking drinke	Happiness, good things

Table 1: A sample of the topics generated by MALLET

From our set of 40 topics, a “happiness” topic emerged, which is topic 22 in Table 1. We discounted the first word, “men,” because “men” appeared as the first word in a number of other topics. As the document-topics report (Illustration 1) shows, happiness was not uniformly distributed among the documents: while many Renaissance education texts talked about happiness, not all did. In most cases, it is a peripheral concern, but a concern nonetheless: the top 30 highest-ranking texts in topic 22 are at least 1% about topic 22. We concluded that, while happiness itself was a pressing concern in many of these texts, they showed a diversity of thought on the topic.

	B	Y
1	Text name	22
71	Comenius - Reformation Schools (1642)	0.93%
72	Independency - Part II (1645)	1.13%
73	Hartlib - Design Plentie (1652)	1.18%
74	Milton - Areopagitica (1644)	1.18%
75	More - Yong Princes (1629)	1.18%
76	Ovid (1640)	1.23%
77	Hartlib - Londons Charity Enlarged Poore Orphans Cry (1650)	1.25%
78	Peacham - Compleat Gentleman (1622)	1.41%
79	Petty - Advice To Hartlib Learning (1647)	1.46%
80	Vicars - Reverend sir (1645)	1.47%
81	Sparke - Poore Orphans Court (1636)	1.58%
82	Percy - Certaine Conceptions (1650)	1.76%
83	JM - School Lavves (1650)	1.80%
84	Seven - Years Slaverie (1640)	1.82%
85	Glory - Of Their Times (1640)	2.00%
86	Scot - Table Book Princes (1621)	2.05%
87	Milton - Reason Church Government (1641)	2.15%
88	Prynne - Falsities (1644)	2.41%
89	Vicars - Picture Independency (1645)	2.41%
90	Sparke - Grevous Grones (1621)	2.45%
91	Marvell - Horatian Ode.txt	2.48%
92	Country - mans care Dialogue (1641)	2.62%
93	Buckler - Fear Death (1640)	3.13%
94	Harmar - Vox Populi (1642)	3.24%
95	Milton - Of Education (1644)	3.28%
96	Rowlands - Heavens Glory (1628)	3.49%
97	Gauden - Kingly Myrrour (1649)	3.84%
98	Hall - Humble Motion (1649)	5.13%
99	Vere - Elegy Sparke Junior (1645)	5.29%
100	Gerbier (1649)	5.47%
101	Hartlib - Macaria (1641)	5.89%
102	Pious - Prentice (1640)	12.13%
103	Crofts - Happiness on Earth (1641)	62.36%

Illustration 1: Document Topics Report for Topic 22 - Top documents

Of Education and “An Horatian Ode” rank about 2-3%, putting them in the top 10th percentile. Clearly, they are interested in the idea of happiness and its relationship to education. This distant reading therefore provides us with context for our close reading: it shows these two texts to be significantly interested in the idea of happiness. Illustration 1 shows, however, that only when writing about education do Milton and Marvell write this much about happiness. This result by itself confirms that happiness is an important concern in both of these works.

We decided to narrow the focus of our close reading further to a text that we would not have identified for comparison with “Horatian Ode” without using MALLET: Robert Crofts’ *Happinesse on Earth* (1641). Topic modeling showed us that *Happinesse on Earth* is the highest ranking text for happiness. A close reading of this text revealed this salient discussion on ambition:

So that it is an unsatiable desire, even as a bottomelesse gulfe, and therefore unnaturall:
For the Philosophers say, **there is no vacuity in nature; but this desire is ever empty, never satisfied.** Honour it selfe doth but serve as more fuell to increase the fire thereof.
The motions of an ambitious mans desire are as Ixions wheele, ever turning and returning, **never giving rest**, but alwaies vexing and troubling the mind. What content can he have who is haunted with such a hag as ambition. It appeares therefore, that an ambitious man is seldome contented, often vexed, never satisfied. If he attaine to be the greatest Monarch on earth, he is vexed at mortality, and grieves because he is not a God. The Angels themselves who fell, are thought to be thus ambitious, who aspiring to be as Gods, were therefore throwne downe to the depth of hell. . .(Crofts, 1641 110-11)

Compare “Horatian Ode”:

Though Justice against Fate complain, / And plead the ancient rights in vain; / But those do hold or break, / As men are strong or weak. / **Nature that hateth emptiness,** / Allows of penetration less: / And therefore must make room / Where greater spirits come” (ll. 37-44)

“Horatian Ode,” without directly saying “ambition,” uses the same image as Crofts to describe “greater spirits.” Therefore, the “Horatian Ode” does not seem to be ambiguous toward Cromwell, but rather sounds a warning. Both texts allude to a natural *unnaturalness*, a level of ambition that is inevitable and therefore dangerous. In this context, “Horatian Ode” warns that Cromwell, as one of the “restless,” “austere,” “greater spirits” in the poem, falls into this category of insatiably ambitious leaders whom Crofts links to the fallen angels.

Conclusion

Distant reading helped us to contextualize “Horatian Ode” in the education writing of the time. It also allowed us to find a work we would not have identified for close reading if not for MALLET. While in theory we could have scoured much of this larger context of literature on our own, distant reading helped us identify a set of texts to concentrate on more quickly, narrowing our focus to a few specific texts, and gave us more confidence in the relevance of our close reading.

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