

As it Likes You:
Early Modern Desire and
Vestigial Impersonal Constructions

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ABSTRACT

As it Likes You: Early Modern Desire and Vestigial Impersonal Constructions

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The word 'like', in its transition from an Old English to a modern English verb, experienced a profound syntactical transformation, having previously been glossed as 'to please'. By the sixteenth century, 'to like' meant almost unconditionally what it means to modern English speakers. However, English Renaissance poets occasionally exploited its archaic usage to produce a rhetorical effect that calls into question notions of subject and object, and which, I argue, foregrounds the way in which language actually generates these subjects and objects rather than merely describing them. In this paper, I read 'to like' psychoanalytically as a verb whose history challenges early modern conceptions of selfhood, reflecting and reinforcing a burgeoning consumer capitalist ideology that posits desire as something contained within the self, and which the self can therefore autonomously control.

Ben Jonson, in the last lines of his celebrated, complicated, self-reflexive epitaph “On His First Son”, addresses his dead boy (also Ben) and then moralizes his own bereavement as follows:

“Rest in soft peace, and, ask’d, say here doth lye
Ben. Jonson his best piece of *poetrie*.
For whose sake, hence-forth, all his vowes be such,
As what he loues may never like too much” (9-12).

Throughout, the poem’s tone is appropriately, similarly somber; but a critical reading reveals, minced among this solemnity, a more mechanical, factual, hyper-poetic disposition, obsessed with language, and blunt and analytical in a way that seems not to befit verse composed to memorialize a seven-year-old boy. Before these above-quoted final couplets, for example, the speaker—coldly, and without the kind of poetic invention that could save a tired metaphor from seeming so aloof—likens the span of his son’s life to a debt: “seuen yeeres tho’wert lent to me, and I thee pay” (3). Stephen Booth argues in his curious volume *Precious Nonsense* that it is in its very triteness that this metaphor contributes to the poem’s central strength: it is not merely uncreative, but it also, upon inspection, constitutes a rhetorical failure which, because of its confidence, goes swift unnoticed. That is, the analogy of death to a debt owed to God may be an applicable metaphor for adults—who, having lived to a certain age, reluctantly satisfy their end of the contract—but cannot agreeably describe a child’s death, her end of the bargain cut unjust short. The metaphor quietly misfires. This slick, confident rhetorical misapplication, according to Booth, foregrounds the arbitrariness of whatever stock rhetorical figure a poet, in communicating grief, chooses to mobilize. That is, to employ with such calm, confident calculation a metaphor so grossly irrelevant to its referent

suggests to a careful reader that “[n]o conceit for dealing with the death of a child can succeed . . . [and] no way of thinking about the death of a child can make it feel any way other than wrong” (Booth 74). And so, the metaphor, through its failure, adjusts the poem’s focus from a dead son to the practice of its own composition.

This displacement of reader response—from a concern for the speaker’s grief, to a concern for the tragic reality that poets can do no better than to merely gesture toward communicating that grief, and ineffectually at that—draws attention to the poem itself, and then to its composer, and creates in the work an indeterminate space, where, to speak grammatically for a moment, what was its object becomes its subject: what was apparently about the son is become surreptitiously about the father. This pattern—where the poet traverses a space between addresser and anticipator of address—continues throughout the epitaph, and time and time again the speaker subtly shifts the poem’s locus from the son he is allegedly describing to the poem (and with it, the poet) that allegedly describes him.

“On His First Son” begins with a winking, euphuistic reference to the Jonson’s sharing a first name with his subject: Benjamin is, according to the Geneva Bible’s etymological gloss, equivalent to “the sonne of the right hand” (Booth 66). And so, when the poet in the first line calls his son the “child of my right hand”, he not only links the son physically and figuratively to his own body, but highlights their already present homonymity, reversing the poem’s subject, deflecting the reader’s fixed attention and recapturing it for himself. Significantly, Jonson employs in this poem an array of tricks—tricks that are always in some way grammatic, linguistic—in order to play with notions of subject- and object-hood.

In line ten, for example, Jonson again employs his linguistic guns, evoking the long-dead his-genitive grammatical trope as a means of temporarily confusing his reader into believing that ‘Ben. Jonson’ ‘here lyes’, rather than his ‘best piece of poetrie’. Linguistically, ‘the king his horse’ had once indicated the genitive case in English, but had been abbreviated almost universally by the early modern period to ‘the king’s horse’. The effect of this grammatical resuscitation, according to Booth, is to offer the reader, prior to the sentence’s completion, “the potentially complete assertion ‘Here doth lie Ben. Jonson’ before coming upon the modification provided by his” (82). Jonson’s wordplay here, however, does not merely foreground grammar as generative, productive, significant—it foregrounds in grammar the special quality of syntax which makes a verbal utterance’s meaning unavailable until the sentence within which it is housed is ended. That is, Jonson is playing here with grammar in a way that demonstrates and exploits the characteristic of symbolic communication which Lacan calls its investment in the “the future anterior in its present”, which posits words’ meanings as predicated on context, and context itself as corralled by pre-existing grammatical law, but nonetheless constantly in flux, changing with each word enunciated (*Écrits* 50).

In his essay “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire”, Lacan describes at length the paradox inherent in communicating meaning symbolically: in language—the marker of the Lacanian Symbolic—all signifiers are barred permanently from reality, and so must gesture continually to other signifiers, hovering endlessly around an untouchable referent and so never achieving completion. But moreover, because these inherently meaningless, infinitely deferred packets of meaning necessarily take *time* to be enunciated, a signifier functions not as a distinct totality, utterable without

temporal mediation, but as something whose meaning changes relative to its context, which itself is also in flux and changes with each additional utterance. A word, that is, is decipherable only within its illusory ‘context’—and this context is generated by a syntax that both commands and carries meaning, in sentences which are grammatically ‘complete’ only with the enunciation of their final word, where “each term [is] anticipated in the construction constituted by the other terms, and, inversely, [seals those terms’] meaning by its retroactive effects” (Lacan *Ecrits* 805).

A sentence, then, never communicates until it signals to its addressee that it is complete, within a predetermined grammar with rules that generate meaning both by anticipating what will happen next in the sentence and by taking into consideration what has already happened in that sentence. By tricking his readership into prematurely considering his utterance finished, then, Jonson plays with language’s temporal dependency, creating, in part, a figure for a son whose life, like the sentence, was similarly cut unfairly short. Jonson exhumes this an archaic construction in order to mystify the object of the transitive verb ‘to lie’ and to foreground the way in which language creates in words—articles that are presumably autonomous and stable—a dependency on their positionality within a system that existed prior to them; and, so doing, again transfers to its poet the poem’s fixated energy, nominally directed at the son.

Further, the poem’s internal voices—the implied headstone and dead son, both of whom the poet bids speak—are (appropriately) profoundly dislocated, and Booth marks Jonson’s imperative on line nine to “rest in soft peace, and, ask’d, say here doth lye . . .” as the site of this cacophony. It is, in this line, impossible to determine with certainty whom or what Jonson addresses: if he is telling his son to ‘rest in soft peace’, then he

cannot possibly also be asking him who is dead also to do the headstone's work of telling who 'here doth lye'; but if Jonson is asking the headstone (and his own poem on it) to tell its viewers where his son is buried, then he cannot possibly be asking that same cold stone and verse to 'rest in soft peace' (Booth 80). And so not only is the poem's central subject not easily determinable, but neither are its internal voices' sources particularly stable—notions of listener and speaker, subject and object, then, each to the other interconstitutive, complicate upon analysis what seems at first glance to be a fairly pedestrian, uncomplicated and monovocal expression of grief.

The poem, in Booth's words, "[a]bove all else, engenders admiration for itself," and is concerned chiefly with its own linguistic and poetic ingenuity rather than with its speaker's grief (100). The poem, then, has its creative locus not in the speaker's dead son, though ostensibly that son is its subject. But neither is it exactly about the poet, of course: and even if it is, then it is only through reflection on his son—and through that reflection's complication by contrived, over-determined grammatic and linguistical play—that the reader is admitted access to the poet in the first place. In this poem, the poet and son are linked intersubjectively, and each relies on the other for the affirmation of his own selfhood: Jonson's identity is located in part in the son whom he describes; and the son's is constituted altogether by the words his father provides to describe him. All of this interplay clatters to a climax in the epitaph's final line, where notions of identity, object- and subject-hood, grammar, and historical linguistics briefly, gracelessly intersect at the poem's third-to-last word.

Because what I'm really interested in here is the word 'like', and let me tell you why.

It may seem that, so far, I have almost been tricking you. It's not always easy to tell when literary criticism will posit a thesis about early modern English subjectivity—and so I suppose it's courteous to warn you before we travel any farther: my interest in Jonson's poem is chiefly linguistic, but linguistic for reasons of recovering from the poem whatsoever it, as a lingual document, may have to say about the notion of selfhood in renaissance England. Jonson's poem interests me primarily for its employment—at the same time and in the same place—first, of an interesting conception of identity as located simultaneously within the self and without it; and then, of a sense that linguistics—that is, not just language, but its genealogy—can function as a site for the creation of meaning. A thorough analysis of how 'like' operates in the epitaph's final line will clarify my point and demonstrate how these two ideas can complement each other in other literary works—but this clarification demands an understanding of what's complicated about Jonson's choosing 'like' over 'please', a clarification which itself predicated on peculiar history of these words' developments in English.

The word 'like', by Jonson's time, was in its standard usage a verb that, like our 'like', conferred its agency and its subjecthood unconditionally to the liker. That is, Jonson's early modern 'like' is generally our 'like': when the doctor likes the booke in early modern England, it is the doctor who exercises agency by liking, and not the booke by pleasing. And so, if the epitaph's last line rings in our modern ears with an alien quality—was Jonson's son too indiscriminate in his pleasure? did he enjoy too many things before dying?—, then we can presume that the line rang alien too to its contemporary audience. By the English renaissance, only in special, rhetorical exceptions—rare but (I argue) significant—does the verb 'to like' ever compel subject

become object, liker become liked, gazer become gazed at. And its use in the last line of “On His First Son” is among these examples.

On the surface, just past its shallow high-grammatics, the poem’s last line seems quite simply to communicate Jonson’s lesson: since you may one day lose it, it is emotionally dangerous to love something which immoderately pleases you. That is, ‘like’, in the case of Jonson’s epitaph—as in only few other contemporary examples, always exceptions to the rule—is interchangeable, apparently without complication, with the verb ‘to please.’ According to Booth, it was only contextually that ‘like’ could be legible as ‘to please’ in early modern English (87), and the tension generated by its momentary ambiguity works to fabricate, in the poem, a confused, mobian membrane between subject and object.

That is, the meaning of this ‘like’ would ultimately have been clear to Jonson’s audience—but, as with the poem’s audience today, it takes a moment’s analysis to understand precisely who or what, in this final line, likes whom or what, and what that’s supposed to mean. It is in this indeterminate, destabilizing moment that we get a sense of the poem’s characters’ agencies, or lack thereof, a sense which creates in linguistics a site for communication, and not merely the description of the process by which the instruments of that communication were produced. This quibbling, I argue, is not unintentional—and Jonson isn’t the only contemporary poet to mine it for rhetorical effect. In *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, Shakespeare’s Thersites watches from a distance Diomedes seem to lose Cassandra’s favor: Diomedes, Thersites’s nemesis, pleads with his beloved that he does “not like this fooling”, to which Thersites quips “Nor I, by Pluto: but that that likes not you pleases me best” (v.ii). Historical linguistics,

however, complicates the apparent equivalence between Jonson's irregular 'to like' and its seeming synonym 'to please', and, in terms of its arguments' agencies, makes doubly indeterminate a verb that—whenever employed in its irregular, archaic sense—was always already inscribed with indeterminacy of subject and object.

One question that demands answering before I attempt further analysis of the changing meaning of the English verb 'to like'—and then, thereafter, analysis of texts in which the verb appears in its archaic and highly irregular function as 'to please'—is whether or not a literary analysis of *linguistic change itself*—which perforce I will attempt—is authorized. That is, can we analyze a verb-itself's linguistic history with the same tools that we might analyze a cultural document? Is the English language a text that is in some way readable, prior (hypothetically, impossibly) to its use as a vessel for communication? Certainly I may use the history of a verb to illuminate its later usage *within texts*—but I intend first to read the verb itself, divorced (again, hypothetically, impossibly) from the documents in which it is used, as if the verb were detachable from its usages, as a cultural text, suggestive and loaded with meaning. But this is a problem.

In all present analyses of the history of the word 'like', theorists have employed the formal, hyper-structuralist vocabulary characteristic of linguistic science in order to demonstrate that the word changed meaning for exclusively syntactic reasons—the loss of case marking in Middle English, for example, or the introduction of French synonyms—, a mode of thinking which suggests that 'like' changed by necessity, and as a consequence of new, grammatic trends that made its first meaning either ambiguous or unnecessary. I propose, however, that, in concert with existing syntactic analysis, we can read 'like's history psychoanalytically, a move which presupposes fundamental,

controversial assumptions about linguistic change: we have to assume, for example, that syntactic theories are incomplete, are insufficient to explain everything about a word's history—and that what morsels linguistic science cannot explain are therefore legitimate loci for cultural, ideological interpretation. Moreover, if I assume that a change in language corresponds with a change in culture—toward, as the argument goes, a new sense, in renaissance England, of what it means to be a subject—, then my question pits chicken against egg: does an already burgeoning shift in western society toward a Cartesian, capitalist subjectivity compel the English language in the late medieval period to abandon almost altogether the usage of like which grants subjecthood to what is liked? or does the verb change by syntactic necessity, and, after its change, influence in some small way the way in which English speakers begin to think about their agency as 'likers'? The answer, I argue, is yes, and both.

Examples like Jonson's in "On His First Son" seem to be invested deliberately with a kind of ambiguity that serves a poetic, meaning-making function. But not every usage in early modern English of this irregular 'to like' seems so loaded with significance; and even as late as the Restoration we can find in utilitarian and decidedly non-euphuistic cultural documents, though extraordinarily rarely, times when ostensibly non-agentive things 'like' humans rather than the other way around. On Tuesday, the fourth of June 1661, for example, Samuel Pepys—privately, presumably without audience, and in secret code—wrote in his *Diary*, after looking for homes with his wife, that "the houses did not like us." That its usage here, unlike Jonson's, seems confidential, uncalculated, prosaic and pedestrian, however, does not mean that we cannot read Pepys's 'like' through a critical lens. In fact, it is precisely that Pepys's 'like' has no

rhetorical function that makes it valuable for analysis—but in a way different from Jonson’s.

The verb’s use in this ‘ordinary’ text suggests that ‘like’ was a word that, even after its lexical and formal transformation to our present ‘to like’, could still work, transparently and without aspiring to rhetorical flourish, to signify something that, as an agent, actively ‘pleases’. This authorizes the critic to read ‘like’ twice. We can read it in text’s like Jonson’s, for example, as a verb whose ambiguity functions deliberately as a rhetorical device, foregrounding within a text a meaningfully confused sense of subject and object. Where it occurs in texts like Pepys, accidentally and not euphuistically, it is as a verb that seems to be vernacular rather than rhetorical. The irregular usage of ‘to like’ is, I argue, a cultural residue—accidental and unpremeditated—of a pre-capitalistic conception of desire not yet successfully extinguished in early modern England, as the indestructible vestige of an obsolete linguo-symbolic skeleton, as something leftover from an old, more communal mentality mapped inadequately onto a new Cartesian frame.

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Eons ago, when things in Anglo-Saxon England first began liking, to ask who or what liked what or whom was, grammatically, a more complicated question than it is today. The Old English verb *lician*, glossed most usually as simply ‘to please’, was, in its earliest surviving usages, according to some linguists, a syntactically impersonal verb, and so had no apparent subject. This following sentences, from Willy Elmer’s book-length study *Diachronic Grammar: The history of Old and Middle English subjectless constructions*, can serve as a model constructions of *lician*’s presumably subjectless construction; the first has an oblique ‘pleaser’, while the second has a nominal one:

“*Tha licade hire . . . that heo wolde tha baan up adon*”
“It liked her to take up the bones” (22)
“*he me wel licath*”
“He me well likes” (307)

As should be apparent from these examples—both of which seem to have subjects, just in the wrong place—there is some elusiveness in the linguistic community as to what precisely constitutes a subjectless construction in Old English. And that linguists, in dealing with *lician*, so often employ terminology like ‘quasi-subject’, ‘quasi-transitive’, and Elmer’s charming ‘squishy subject’ (51) seems to reinforce the ambiguity that surrounds discussion of Old English grammatic subjecthood. In the second sentence, for example, a modern English reader would be tempted to assign ‘he’ the subject role and ‘me’ the object role, given that the former is nominative and the latter dative. But Elmer prohibits us.

According to Elmer’s argument, because transitivity is syntactically absent in constructions surrounding the Old English *lician*, and because *lician*’s transitive-like constructions function differently from modern English transitives, we cannot, in speaking about *lician*’s arguments, designate a subject and an object, since, syntactically, neither precisely existed. That is, even though dative, accusative, and nominative case markings are present relative to *lician* in Old English, they do not necessarily designate, as in modern English, objectivity or subjectivity—and, in fact, we find that *lician* is used almost exclusively with a dative-case noun in the position of what we would call the subject (Elmer 37).

That the Old English *lician* did not employ subjects and objects in the way we think of them, however, may illuminate the unnaturalness an ideological meme that took until the English Renaissance to ingratiate itself steadfastly into the Western mentality.

Barbara Freedman examines in her *Staging the Gaze* the Heidiggerean rereading of the notion of the Elizabethan world picture, positing that thinkers in the English Renaissance began to think of the world *as* a picture, an “epistemological model based upon an observer who stands outside of what she sees in a definite position of mastery over it” (9). In order for the subject to stand at odds with his or her object, however, and dominate it scopically, it is necessary that there be a distinction made between the self and the world in which she lives, a shift in thinking from ecological to environmental, from a world in which humans are implicated systemically, as objects among it, to one in which humans are merely contained by (and working thereafter merely to contain) a world system that is somehow other than themselves, as subjects against it. A critical reading of *lician* seems, then, to evince the transition of reality in the Renaissance from what Julian Yates calls a “world of things”, in which humans are implicated, “into a world of objects” which suddenly demand attention from us who are above and distinct from them: a world that once ‘liked’ human objects was now become itself the object which humans ‘like’ from a ‘position of mastery’ (6).

Cynthia Allen, compounding the grammatic confusion—and perhaps participating in the centuries long project of the Western subject, revising our subjecthood such that it is not a development, but a self-evident truth, demonstrably present throughout human history—advocates a nuanced approach to looking at the verb *lician*, and suggests that dative case marking doesn’t necessarily preclude a noun or a pronoun from serving what is syntactically, formally a subject function (*Case Marking* 20). And so *lician*, in Allen’s terminology, may have not have had merely a dative quasi-subject, but—if we look at the Experiencer’s position in *lician* and put that data in conversation with word-order

patterns in Old English—it might actually have a dative *subject proper*, a curious construction for which there are, nevertheless, precedents in Japanese, Georgian, Korean, Bengali, and a number of other languages (Allen “Reconsidering . . .” 389). But for the subject of *lician* to be dative demands a re-conception of how ‘liking’ works: the action seems to come from both directions, having its source in neither the ‘object’ or the ‘subject’, being that that subject is dative, and so is somehow the ‘object’ of something, even if not grammatically. Generally, however, in Old English, instead of subject and object, it is less ambiguous to think in terms of an experiencer of emotion and the theme of that emotion: the theme, when applied to *lician*, refers to what causes pleasure (or, what seems like *lician*’s subject); the experiencer, to what receives or experiences that pleasure (what we would be tempted to call *lician*’s object).

Ultimately, *lician*’s dative experiencer did become reliably, by the sixteenth century, nominal, and assumed thereafter the role of the verb’s subject. It is essential to my argument, however, that this shift from a dative to a nominal experiencer be not merely the consequence of a syntactic change, or else my reading of the verb would be necessarily limited to a reading of the changes in the linguistic system, the change in verb itself being, in that situation, merely an effect of deeper linguistic shift that necessitated its transformation, issuing symptomatically from the system rather than undergoing an—I speak figuratively—‘autonomous’ shift. And so, in order to leave space for a critical analysis of the ‘verb itself’, it is necessary first to demonstrate that *lician* changed in a way that was particular, and, so doing, work to divorce the verb from any general, widespread syntactic shift in English from impersonal to personal constructions that

transpired in the middle ages, treating *lician* instead as a special case that can be examined beyond the boundaries of scientific, linguistic analyses.

That a verb like *lician* can take a dative Experiencer that transforms, over the centuries, into a nominative subject, is in Old English not a unique phenomenon. The verb *losian*, glossed as ‘to lose’, for example, also always had a dative Experiencer, and ultimately, by early modern period, underwent the same subject/object reversal as *lician*: what used to lose Anglo-Saxons, Englishmen would come to lose. But the difference between the histories of these verbs’ semantic makeovers is significant, and foregrounds a substantial difference between a verb whose semantic meaning may have changed as a consequence of syntactic reanalysis (*losian*), and one whose meaning changed for other reasons (*lician*). In short, if *lician* and *losian* underwent the same change for the same reasons, it would make sense their changes would happen simultaneously. *Losian*, however, occurs exclusively with nominative Experiencers already by the 1200s; *lician*, however, does not fully transform until centuries later; and even then, the change is much more gradual than with *losian*, whose transformation is roughly contemporaneous with the loss of case marking that purportedly led to the reanalysis of ‘like’ (Allen “Reconsidering. . .” 384).

Allen spends the first half of her essay discounting the notion, widely held among linguists, that *lician*, in changing from ‘to please’ to ‘to like’, was part of a general trend in Middle English, in which many verbs that were previously ‘impersonal’ became ‘personal’. This general development, the story goes, was prompted by the an ambiguity generated by the loss, outside of pronouns, of case markings in Middle English, a phenomenon that Allen attributes “to the incomplete language-learning on the part of

French speakers who failed to master the case-marking system of English” (*Case Marking* 444). Without case marking, sentences with two non-pronominal arguments (pronouns having maintained case markings throughout Middle English) would become structurally illegible, and word order would become the privileged means of establishing words’ semantic functions within a sentence.

“The king (dative) liked (plural) pears (nominative)”, for example, is a sentence which would theoretically demand the reanalysis by word order if my parenthetical case markings were lost (Allen “Reconsidering” 376). Old English speakers would have recognized the dative king as the experiencer and the nominative pears as the pleasure-giver; and, without the dative marking, the sentence would still be legible so long as the number marking of the verb indicated that the plural pears were the actors. But when both the plural marking and the dative marking were lost, the king would have been analyzed as subject, since word order, by the emergence of Middle English, would then have governed that the king was in the subject position and the pears were in the object position, granting the king, out of nowhere, the power ‘to like’, as if some quality of liking could emerge from the subject’s body in the same way eye beams do for gazing.

Looking closely at the verb’s textual history, Allen provides a number of compelling arguments that suggest that mere syntactic reanalysis could not have caused English speakers to rethink the meaning of the verb *lician*. The condition of possibility for syntactic reanalysis is grammatical ambiguity: but Allen suggests that, with *lician*, this ambiguity simply never existed, and so, neither could have syntactic reanalysis. It is significant, for example, that the example above, with the king and his pears, is merely theoretical: sentences in which *lician* took two non-pronominal arguments were

exceptionally rare. And so long as one of *lician*'s arguments is a declinable pronoun, we will be able to tell experiencer from theme, and its structure will be unambiguous.

For the syntactic reanalysis argument to stand, then, we must observe a period of time in which a newly ambiguous *lician* has in its usage, almost always, no pronouns for arguments. However, only once in all of Chaucer's writings is it the case—out of thirty-two instances of verbs derived from *lician*—that neither of the verb's argument is a declinable pronoun: and, given that Chaucer's generation was according to Allen, “the generation which was just starting to ‘reanalyze’ the experiencer of this verb as its subject, since in two sentences in his writings this experiencer is nominative”, it should be in Chaucer's writings that we would find the most ambiguity if the verb transformed for merely grammatical reasons (“Reconsidering” 378). Sentences generating the syntactic ambiguity which would have provoked reanalysis of *lician*, then, were illustrations of a rare, marginal alternative to an unambiguous standard, and so purely grammatic reanalysis is an unlikely explanation for *lician*'s syntactic adjustment.

Rather, what transpired, Elmer and Allen agree, is that the presence of a synonym for ‘to please’ in Old English provoked what process is generally characteristic of synonyms: when a language has two words with almost indistinguishable meanings, according to Allen, “it is very likely that any slight difference in connotation will be exaggerated by succeeding generations of language learners, to the point where the two verbs end up with completely distinct, if not opposite meanings” (“Reconsidering . . .” 404). The verbs *cweman* and *lician*, then, glossed identically in Old English as ‘to please’, traveled down etymologically divergent paths as a consequence of slight syntactic variances in their use. In general, we can characterize the distinction between

lician and *cweman*—even before the shift in *lician*'s experiencer from dative to nominative (that is, to subjective 'likers', invested with the capacity to 'like')—cleanly: *cweman* is a verb that is, as Allen suggests, in some way “*about* the Theme, while *lician* is *about* the Experiencer” (147).

The use of a pronoun suggests an authorial presumption that the reader already knows what that pronoun's referent is, and so Allen uses pronoun assignment as a suggestion that whichever argument is represented pronominally will generally be more topical than the verb's other argument. *Cweman* in Old English appears—in constructions with one pronoun and one noun—seventy-eight percent of the time with a pronominal theme, whereas *lician* appears sixty percent of the time with a pronominal experiencer (Allen *Case Marking* 148); and this polarizing trend becomes stronger in Middle English (Allen *Case Marking* 333). Moreover, the choice of *cweman* over *lician* seems in Old English to indicate something about volition, either in the experiencer or the theme: that is, with *cweman*, unlike *lician*, the theme is generally animate, active, and seems deliberately to be pleasing its experiencer. In fact—unlike *lician*, which occurs seventy-nine percent of the time with a non-human theme—only once in all of its appearances in surviving Old English texts does *cweman* appear with anything *but* a human theme (Allen *Case Marking* 146). The exception, however, is suggestive:

“*Witodlice tha gecwemdon tha word his earum.*”
“Truly then pleased the words his ears.”

It may not be accidental that it is ‘words’ who occupy the position of *cweman*'s only non-human theme—and it certainly resonates with my argument that a shift in the usage of ‘to like’ correlated with a shift in how people ‘liked’. That is, to allow ‘words’ this position in a *cweman* construction may imply that words are, in terms of agency,

somehow similar to humans. This illustration materializes the Lacanian suggestion that the process of signification, with its endless baton-pass from signifier to signifier, and with its “repeating interval, the most radical structure of the signifying chain, is the locus haunted by metonymy, the latter being the vehicle of desire” (Ecrits 844). That is, language, by the nature of the rules generated by its syntax—always obfuscations of, and always irrevocably distant from events in the Real—, is itself a figure for the metonymic pursuit of the *objet petit a*, the altogether approximate Lacaneologism which signifies algebraically the untranslatable, indestructible, and wholly inaccessible remainder of the Real left after its being mapped onto the Symbolic.

That is, any effort to symbolize a Real event inevitably generates a syntax which necessarily privileges some modes of description while altogether and structurally precluding others, frustrating attempts at achieving completion and at closing the gap between the signifier and its signified. A change in grammar, then, is a change in mindways, since grammar in some ways creates the distinction between subject and object by making alternatives syntactically unavailable—especially when the grammar that changes is grammar relevant to a verb whose function is to signify desire unmediated, and whose subject and object are ontologically imaginary. How, after all, does one ‘like’, anyway?—and what muscles are involved? Words, then, are agents which create social reality, effectively decentering and displacing the Cartesian subject. A syntactic shift in the way *lician* works motivates the speaker to re-think the way in which she experiences pleasure, from a sensation generated outside of the experiencer (who is externally motivated to be pleased), to a sensation that that subject—internally, autonomously—generates within herself.

Cweman was replaced in Middle English by the French import ‘to please’—and, in time, ‘to please’ and ‘to like’ polarized, becoming each the other’s absolute inverse, ‘to like’ assigning subjecthood to the animate (almost exclusively human) impacted party when it used to assign only topicality to her; and ‘to please’ assigning subjecthood and topicality to the usually human *source* of pleasure.

But this leaves a question unanswered: why did ‘like’ ultimately take a human subject rather than a human object? Linguistic analysis explains for us why ‘to please’ came ultimately to grant topicality to the theme, while ‘to like’ gave it to the experiencer: but an argument’s topicality does not inevitably lead to its subjecthood. There are other verbs, in English and elsewhere, for example, which give the animate agent topicality while granting subjecthood grammatically to the inanimate. The analogue for ‘to like’ in Spanish, for example, is ‘*me gusta*’, which means ‘it likes (i.e. pleases) me’, and functions in precisely the same way that the English utterance ‘spinach disgusts me’ posits a human object and an inanimate subject.

I argue that the dawn of new economic and social structures, marked by a shift from feudal and monarchal to capitalist and representative institutions, correlated with a change in the way the English theorized desire—that is, that it was sourced in an autonomous self rather than generated elsewhere. In addition to the absence in Spanish history of the particular kind of linguistic pressure which the English language faced from French, the cultural history of Spain provides explanation as to why ‘*gustar*’ should not have been rethought, like ‘like’ was, as a verb granting subjecthood to the human experiencer.

Spain maintained throughout the early modern period a stronger centralized monarchy than England, and fostered a culture of systematically stifling, from the top down, non-Catholic heretical movements. These movements, unsuppressed, might have occasioned in Spain a gesture toward early modern English protestant subjectivity, where a sense of the autonomous, self-regulating individual could be invested inwardly with the discipline that the Spanish Inquisition guaranteed externally. Because these movements were never allowed to transpire, however, early modern Spanish society never reacted in the same way at the rest of Europe to the continent's "broader cultural crisis . . . [of] spiritual anxiety, [wherethrough] a despairing sense of the impossibility of redemption suddenly transformed into an inner conviction of salvation through faith in God's love" (Greenblatt 52). And so Spain, profoundly Catholic, failed in the early modern period to let internalize within the Spanish subject the authority of the monarch. I propose, then, that the project which in England—according to accounts like Barker's and Foucault's—successfully created the English subject, and thereafter invested her with a sense of shame, privacy, and inwardness (sites in which social, political, and economic authority could be planted and disseminated) is linked, in some small way, to the creation of subject-sourced grammatical constructions, like the early modern 'to like', which posited the subject as the source of his own desires.

Most often in early modern English literature, when 'to like' means 'to please', it does so offstage, to evoke a quality either of foreignness or ideological displacement which prompts the reader explicitly *not* to identify with the speaker's sentiments. In Shakespeare's plays, for example, 'to like' means 'to please' most usually when it is housed in clichés which connote an altogether archaic way of thinking: Alexander

asserts, for example, in *Henry VI Part II* “. . . an’t like your majesty.”, and the same phrase reappears over and over again, throughout Shakespeare’s plays whenever someone addresses nobility, a rhetorical choice which suggests that the sense of ‘to like’ which means ‘to please’ belongs someplace else, neutralizing the impact of the verb, and rendering it inoffensive through employment in clichés which demand little syntactic evaluation from the audience (V.i.). Similarly, when Lafeu in *Alls Well That Ends Well* announces that “As the Dutchman says: I’ll like a maid the better, while I have a tooth in my head” (II.iii.), he treats the irregular construction explicitly as an import, worth analyzing as an the enunciation of an Other located elsewhere, and not as worth looking critically at as the affirmation of a discontinuity between old and new notions of subjecthood, as a foreignness located geographically within English history (II.iii). As the early modern period became the modern period, then, ‘like’ lost the possibility for archaic revision except when both reader and author agree that the speaker of that ‘like’ is, in some way, temporally, socially, or spatially an Other speaker, whose desireways are alien to the reader’s own.

Spencer’s *Faerie Queen*, ostensibly obsessed with the pursuit of seeming antiquated, should be a good text with which to begin looking at how the archaic construction of ‘like’ functions in early modern English. However, a thorough search reveals that Spencer avoids the verb altogether, and uses ‘to like’ as a verb (though he uses it dozens of times as an adjective) only once in the whole of his *Faerie Queen*—and then only in its conventional, modern sense, to describe “[f]oolish Narcisse, that likes the watry shore” (III.xlv). Such an omission—an obstruction on par with French novels writ without the letter ‘e’—seems to speak to a larger anxiety surrounding the word in the

project of building the nation-state. That is, a mythopoetic history of England which postures stylistically as archaic ought to use ‘like’ in its archaic sense—but to do so too often would foreground the shift in ‘like’ from an action which invests its agency in the in the object to one in which humans have agency, potentially threatening the reader’s faith in her own ability autonomously ‘to like’. Thus, Spencer seems to avoid the dilemma altogether—that is, to commit either a stylistic blunder or an ideological one—by eliminating the troublesome term from his lexicon. The admission that ‘to like’ used to be *lician* would be the admission that subjecthood is not verifiably present throughout human history, and that the autonomous subject—who insists to the human that “Only other people have bodies [and are therefore susceptible to becoming objects], but you are different, for you have become the great solar eye that sees and knows all”—is therefore not a self-evident, natural fixture of human life, but a construction (Yates xii). And, potentially, a grammatical construction.

At the border between the two senses of ‘to like’, then, lies a threat to the subject. To employ—as Jonson does in his epitaph and as Spencer seems deliberately to avoid doing—‘like’ in its double sense, indeterminately both as ‘to like’ and ‘to please’, creates, grammatically, an unclear sense of who ‘likes’ what—and, so doing, not only offers the Other as the source of the subject’s desire, but thereafter introduces the radical possibility that desire is itself a linguistic phenomenon, and that desire is generated not just outside of the self, but also outside of the object of desire, within language, and within very syntax which, in describing the transaction, always produces an object and subject of desire.

When ‘like’ equivocates, as in the last line of Jonson’s poem, its equivocation always threatens to shatter the bar between what the Cartesian *cogito* believes that it desires autonomously in the Other, and the reflexive desire-to-be-desired that always already motivates that first craving, constituting the condition of possibility for the subject to be located symbolically in a never satisfied, perennially deferring network of ‘likes’. That is, when ‘like’ glosses ambiguously in early modern texts, the *cogito* is doubly threatened. Initially, ‘like’ is a grammatical aporia that forces that subject to admit that, in an encounter with something that pleases her, she—that nominally autonomous self—may not be choosing to ‘like’, but may instead be *drawn into* ‘liking’ by whatever inanimate thing generates her desire. That is, the either/or structure that grammar demands forces the ‘liker’ to deduce logically that, if she does not govern a sentence’s subject-verb agreement, then she must admit agency to something outside of herself. So doing forces the subject to rethink her own animacy, to question her own partition from the sphere of Thingness, and to wonder whether she is the Jar at the center, or merely a marginal figure indistinguishable from the Tennessee that (dis)contains her. For the king to like pears is one thing; but for the pears to ‘like’ the king is a decentering that is altogether regicidal.

More disorienting, however, than this immediate effect of the early modern, rhetorical liker-that-pleases construction is what second, post-syntactic threat that the verb constitutes to the Cartesian subject. . “The key” to re-thinking subjectivity and the division it draws between humans and their ecology, insists Julian Yates, “is not the simple substitution of object for subject, but rather a shift to emphasize the syntactic

markers¹ themselves” which generate in the first place the distinction between object and subject (8). An indeterminate ‘like’, then, which foregrounds these markers, is haunted by the possibility that here, at the very edge of the syntactic boundary between the grammatic subject and object, the self may not only become object to what inanimate thing she assumed was always *her* object, but she may, moreover, cease altogether to be either object or subject, each being a notion—as an indeterminate ‘like’ makes suddenly apparent—which language may *produce* rather than merely *describe*. That is, our transitional ‘like’ threatens not only to bring the subject to the other side of a dichotomy between an actor and her acted-upon, but—in forcing the reader to recognize the possibility that the distinction between liker and liked is generated by grammar, rather than that grammar being a reflection of an already present, ontologically-grounded distinction between a ‘liker’ and a ‘liked’—also threatens that very distinction itself, a difference without which symbolic positionality and spoken subjecthood are impossible.

Looking at the Lacanian model of the intersubjective constitution of the desiring self can further demonstrate how a hop from subject to object can be a menace not only to the subject, but also to subjecthood itself, in that it forces the subject to travel backwards through the stages of human development, from the subject of language who speaks herSelf into existence, to the self of the oedipal triangle, who is always object to something outside of itself. According to Lacan’s description of the mirror stage, a human becomes a subject in language (the first-person subject pronoun *je*) only after she

¹ Yates here does not mean grammatical syntax, but rather human systems of knowledge and identity, at whose boundaries exists the opportunity to invalidate the difference between inside and outside and subject and object. These boundaries—dirty spots—are where systems attempt to reify themselves, close gaps, and obfuscate contradictions in their internal logic,—but only untenably. Her examination of the failure of the early modern flush toilet, for example—ostensibly, illusorily the site of the splitting of self from environment—helps us look more closely at whatsoever dirt, contradictory and illogical, we expel from systems. But this works for grammar too, who casts off what it cannot contain or explain.

has first constituted herself precariously as an imaginary object (the first –person object pronoun *moi*), dependent initially on her mother to confirm her own identity, and dependent later on the regard of “others in Real situations who enable the *moi* to reconstitute itself continually” (Ragland-Sullivan 49).

It is worth noting that, in his second seminar, Lacan’s word for this perpetually alienated ego—this imaginary form which the infant, at around eighteen months, invents and then identifies with—is an object pronoun: the *moi* exists only so long as someThing outside of herself verifies her existence, a process which may be imagined as a perpetual transitive verb acting continually on a nominally stable, illusorily cohesive object-self. Lacan employs an army of toy robots to describe metaphorically how the subject’s autonomy is founded paradoxically on the confirmation of her selfhood by others: his robotic “turtles or foxes” are designed in such a way as to remain inactive until they recognize another of their kind, and so each turtle depends mechanically on another for its motivation, and “whatever it is that the first is oriented toward will always depend on what the other is oriented toward” (Lacan *Second Seminar* 51). Desire, then, according to Lacan, is not the desire of the autonomous ‘liker’ for what he ‘likes’, but, rather, the desire for that ‘liker’ to become the object of another’s ‘liking’, a suggestion that seems more transparent when ‘to like’ means—paradoxically, but somehow appropriately—‘to please’. The archaic form of ‘to like’, *lician*, seems to betray the suspicion that desire is not only *housed* in the other, but also, that desire is *generated* by in the subject’s desire to be desired by that same other: to ‘like’ is, in Lacanian terms, really ‘to make oneself likeable; to anticipate what the other likes and, so becoming, make her like me’, a mentality which posits desire as something located altogether outside of the self.

However, this pre-linguistic order of the Imaginary—this home of the *moi*—, where each “ego . . . hangs completely on the unity of another ego[,] is”, Lacan insists in the same essay, “strictly incompatible with the plane of desire” (Lacan *Second Seminar* 51). To illustrate the impossibility of desire in the field of the *moi*, Lacan shows that desire is something which, in twin-turtle interconstitutive pairs, must be enunciated by some third party: that is, it is impossible for either turtle, each dependent on the other for its mechanical existence, to announce “*I desire that*”, since “[a]dmitting that there is an *I* would immediately turn it into *you desire that*” (Lacan *Second Seminar* 51). And so, in a party of two units whose identities are predicated each on the other’s, it would be impossible to ‘like’ something without admitting that this ‘liking’ was articulated either by both turtles simultaneously (each’s enunciation being housed in the other who motivates him, and so every enunciation being always already simultaneously the other’s), or by a third party who is somehow outside of the loop.

In Oedipal terms, the relationship between mother and child serves as the model for other intersubjective occasions for desire, and mobilizes in the field of psychoanalytic reality this turtle game. The infant recognizes, in the first ‘time’ of the Oedipal complex, that his mother is incomplete, and so he attempts to be the eminently desirable phallic object that will complete her—attempts, that is, to ying his mother’s yang, to “lodge . . . his or her lack of being in that ‘place’ where the other was lacking” (Fink 54). And the moment he postures himself as a phallic object, he divorces himself permanently from the preoedipal, Freudian ‘oceanic experience’, and begins gesturing toward subjecthood (Evans 22). What delivers the human *moi* from its inherent ‘outside-of-itself-ness’, the alienation which characterizes its absent identity, is its initiation into the order of

language, which translates the intersubjective, dependent alienation of the *moi* into a relationship in which each turtlebot, in speaking out loud, produces in itself that *third party* which Lacan insists is necessary for desire to exist through triangulation with an imaginary other who other than both self and other. But this third party—because the subject speaks him into existence—is, of course, also illusory, and depends on the recognition of others for its sustenance: the speaking subject—suspended all his life in a symbolic network of signifiers that precedes him and made space for him before even he was born—“is not the cause of himself . . . for his cause is the signifier, without which there would be no subject in the real” (*Ecrits* 835).

Thus, the turtlebot’s speech, which ought to establish his subjecthood, is in fact a mark that affirms the absence of his subjecthood. Signifiers—which exist altogether outside of the *moi*, in the field of the “Other [who is] the locus of his signifying cause”—are the untenable source of that eternally-object *moi*’s subjectivity (*Ecrits* 841). Both vessel for communication and that vessel’s captain, the signifying chain superciliously addresses the reader in Lacan’s “Seminar on the Purloined Letter”:

“You believe you are taking action when I am the one making you stir at the bidding of the bonds with which I weave your desires. Thus do the latter grow in strength and multiply in objects, bringing you back to the fragmentation of your rent childhood” (*Ecrits* 40).

And so, language² which intends to reify the subject’s identity, in fact only betrays the subject’s alienation from himself. That is, if language, which grounds the ego, is itself predicated on a perennial metonymic slope of signifiers and so itself lacks grounding, then the subject’s selfhood is twice dislocated: first, because its *moi* exists relative to

² (who, I’ll remind you, is granted some interesting sense of agency in being the only non-human theme of *cwēman* extant in Anglo-Saxon literature)

other people, and so is not ‘inside’ of herself; and again because the symbolic sphere which purportedly hypostatizes the *moi* actually displaces it even further. Language is therefore always already a threat to subjectivity, even without syntactic patterns within language that expose the constructed nature of the subject. That is, even if language were somehow an adequate reflection of reality, built without grammatical contradictions that predisposed it, it would, by its function, anyhow displace the subject. But the English language ‘creates’ the subject twice—once, simply by ‘being’ a language which invents a *je* who illusorily props up the *moi*; and second, by generating , through grammatic particulars, an active subject who masters a passive object—, and in confusing this latter, grammatic construction of subjecthood, Jonson’s ‘like’ threatens the first, structural construction.

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“The ‘I’ can achieve a certain balance and harmony through love. But in the Lacanian intrasubjective dynamic between the *moi* and the Other’s Desire and their refraction through the distortion of language and via the intersubjectivity of relationship, this balance will be like the eternal ebb and flow of the sea” (Ragland-Sullivan 41).

While capitalism depends, for its perpetuation, on desire’s perpetual ‘ebb and flow’, on this intrinsic dissatisfaction, it also depends on the subject’s faith that the ‘ebb and flow’ can be resolved, and that the self can, with the right choices, be made total, autonomous. We can look to Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair*—a text in which Jonson employs the irregular ‘like’ only enveloped, as with the abovequoted illustrations, in always-already antiquated constructions—to see how consumer capitalism, in early modern England as today, depends the illusion that the ‘ebb and flow’ which constitutes the self and its desire can be satisfied—and with that satisfaction, a fully autonomous

subject affirmed—with ebb enough in the right direction. Shakespeare seems to offer us, in *The Merchant of Venice* a similar false dichotomy which structurally excludes the possibility that desire's source is located in the other: “tell me where is fancy bred/Or in the heart or in the head” (III.i.). No matter your answer, your ‘fancy’ always materializes internally within yourself and is transferred thereafter onto the Other, who waits passive for the liker's autonomous decision.

Capitalism demands that consumers believe that their dissatisfaction can be materially satisfied, and depends on installing in the subject the belief that his desires are his own, and are not altogether not the desire of the self to be the object of the other's desire. In *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson's farcical, cogent exploration of early modern capitalism, Leatherhead hawks his wares—“ Rattles, drums, halberts, horses, babies o' the best, fiddles of the finest!”—, soliciting passersby with the suggestive question “What do you lack?” (II.i). This interrogative functions, in the Althusserian sense, as a hailing into capitalist ideology, demanding that the subject identify himself with a sense of autonomous selfhood that posits his desires as located within himself, suggesting that the can therefore choose what he ‘likes’ in pursuit of fulfillment. This constructs desire as a one-way street and the human as a bank which is constantly filling himself, and contradicts the Lacanian sense that desire is always the desire for the Other to recognize you as the object of her desire (that is, the anxious hope that the Other is in fact the ‘bank-who-is-constantly-filling-herself’ that you are not). Appropriately, the irregular ‘like’ appears in only one place in *Bartholomew Fair*, and in the same displaced, offstage sense as it usually appears in Shakespeare: “an't like your worship?” asks Troubleall of Cokes, evoking momentarily, and from the mouth of a madman—as a brief foil to the

play's capitalist backdrop—the logic of the feudal economic and social institutions, and the old notions of selfhood that they entail (III.iv).

Looking again at the etymology of *lician*, we can find resonances of the sensibility that 'liking' was conceived originally as something which has its locus in a space between the self and the Other, where desire has more to do with the intersubjective constitution, with conversation between self and Other than with the subject trying impotently, instrumentally to consume the Other in order to plug up the gaps in its selfhood that the *moi* and *je* leave incomplete, as consumer capitalist ideology would have its interpellated believe is possible.

Lician has its roots, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, in the same place as the adjectival 'like'—that is, they both are rooted in the noun 'lich', which denotes, depending on the text in which it is mobilized, either a living or dead body. If we put this in conversation with Allen's assertion that *lician* initially meant 'to resemble' before it came to be used as 'to please', the verb's transitive history begins to make more sense (Allen *Case Marking* 149). If there is a connection in the linguistic housing of Old English desire between what pleases somebody and what is in some way similar to her, then we can imagine a transitional period—evidence of which Allen announces but fails to provide—in which 'like', a verb that was initially more or less existential, became an active; and, once active, the transaction that it described had to be invented. Between a 'liker' and a 'liked', there are no energies, imaginary or not, transferred when *lician* is glossed as 'to resemble': but when it becomes 'to please', we must imagine some kind of transfer, a transaction of 'like-force' that emanates from either the object of desire or the experiencer of that desire.

And so, when we read ‘to like’ and are prompted to make the choice between a human actor who ‘likes’ and an inanimate, ostensible non-agent who nonetheless becomes subject and so ‘likes us’, we are faced with a second dilemma. In reading this transitional ‘like’, a reader gets the sense that subject and object are, in a ‘liking’ encounter, hollow signifiers, designating nothing. The energy that the ‘liker’ forces on the ‘liked’ (or vice versa) is make-believe: it has no originary, material presence—and unlike the Lacanian gaze (whose materiality is also necessarily absent), it does even have an organ or an action (i.e. sight) with which it can be associated. ‘Like’ is a verb which seems to designate the transfer of pure desiring energy, with no material constituent. The possibility becomes apparent, then, that the notion of ‘liking’ can be an action assigned to one half of the like/liker dyad only in the logic of grammar, where the presence of a transitive verb necessarily stipulates a distinction between agent and object. And without syntactical principles to generate this distinction, and no observable phenomenon associated with ‘liking’ to defend it, there can be nothing left to prop up the ‘liker’ against the ‘liked’. We are left to think of the indeterminate ‘like’ at first as an either/or, where what ‘likes’ what is somehow determinable; and then as a both/and, where each argument likes the other, but grammar fails to accommodate the intersubjective disposition.

The gaze in the Lacanian sense can provide us an interesting way to think about the verb ‘to like’, and the desire it evokes. To Lacan, the gaze “is not simply a glance cast from the eye, nor a glance from reflective consciousness, because [it] has the power to activate within consciousness an awareness of unconscious motivation and intentionality”, and so ought not to be confused with the sensation of looking (Ragland-

Sullivan 94). Rather, the gaze is the *object* of the look—an unseeable, impossible something—or, as Freedman stresses, the impossible condition of seeing oneself being seen, an aspiration which threatens the subject by foregrounding the reality that she can only see herself as cohesive and total by imaging herSelf as an object located someplace outside of herself (Freedman 53). That is, the scopic drive—necessarily unsatisfiable and, like language, hovering perennially around an impossible signified—is the subject’s longing to fix its displacement by having its longing for recognition as self recognized by an Other. The look, then, is merely a vehicle for this process.

This complicates our understanding of ‘liking’. The eye is a vessel for desire, the first step in an unsatisfiable process, the secondary action performed to achieve a primary goal: but ‘to like’ seems to be a synonym for ‘desiring’ itself, and so doesn’t lend itself to the same kind of structural, signifier/signified reading, since ‘to desire’ is unmediated by organs or secondary functions. It seems altogether to skip the *object petit a* as the motivation for desire. But since etymologically, *lician* is rooted in the same word as ‘body’, we can think about ‘to like’ in the same way we think of ‘to look’, as secondary rather than unmediated. If looking is not the object of the scopic drive, but only its perpetual aspiration to achieve the impossible task of ‘looking at oneself looking’—and consequently dislodging oneself from symbolic positionality—then we can think of a verb whose meaning was originally ‘to resemble’ similarly, as only the first step toward achieving an impossible goal.

Let’s suppose then that ‘to like’ is not precisely unmediatedly ‘to desire’, but actually (because it means etymologically, approximately ‘to be of the same body’) a verb signifying the impossible task incorporate someThing else into oneSelf, while

reflexively incorporating oneSelf into someThing else—that is, to stare one’s doppelganger in the eye, to radically undo the work of the project of autonomous subjecthood, and to eliminate the distinction between ‘liker’ and ‘liked’. Sidney insists in his *Arcadia*, after all, that “likenes is a great cause of liking, and that contraries, inferre contrary consequences.” Appropriately, in fact, many of the illustrations I’ve found of the irregular ‘to like’ connote incorporation, consumption, effusion in some way: for example, “music”—that penetrating, flooding influence—“likes not” Julia in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (IV, ii); and the protagonist is compelled in Gascoigne’s *Master F.J.* “to assay if he will eate any thing, [unless] here be no meates that like him”. Curiously, there is a strong correlation between this irregular ‘to like’ and images of places, items which necessarily envelop and incorporate subjects, compelling that subject to question his agency relative to what contains him. Sidney admonishes those who like roses, for example, not to visit *Arcadia*, since “Any place will better like them” (59). Sidney again uses the irregular ‘like’ in *Arcadia* to give agency to places in insisting “that it likes me much better, when I finde vertue in a faire lodging, then when I am bound to seeke it in an ill faouered creature, like a pearle in a dounghill” (135). And Shakespeare too lets places ‘like’ people in *Henry V*, where a “lodging likes” Erpingham (IV.i).

Let’s return, then, finally to Jonson’s “On His First Son”—a poem where a knowledge of an object (his son) leads always to knowledge of the poet’s self—and see how an understanding of the linguistic history of ‘like’ can help a reader theorize the verb’s usage in early modern England. The reader will graciously remember that *lician*, unlike *cweman*, usually had a non-human theme—that is, whatever caused the pleasure with *lician* was usually inanimate. And so, when something *lician*-likes us (rather than

cweman-pleases us), we, as experiences of pleasure, are always, by definition, the verb's active argument; and the source of the pleasure is almost always inanimate. When we put in conversation with Jonson's dead son the idea that *lician* (and, by extension, 'to like') connotes an inanimate, non-volitional source of pleasure, the results are illuminating and grotesque: the son who 'likes' Jonson cannot have volition, being dead, and so 'to like' is in some ways appropriate. But Jonson isn't musing on a dead son 'liking' him: it is the son who was alive, and now is gone, that 'liked' him so much that he swears off liking altogether and forever. Jonson puts the younger, Jonson, then, in a third place, between volition and inanimacy.

To leave 'like' in its third, indeterminate, transitional space—where 'to like' and 'to please' meet at their asymptote, an untouchable *object petit a*—materializes linguistically the blind spot on which the constitution and symbolic positioning of the self is predicated. If we use 'like's' etymology to assume that the verb connotes in some way a desire for reflexive, impossible, bodily incorporation with the other, then we can think of this blind spot as the space between the self as autonomous and contextually determined. This rhetorical trick, like Renaissance perspectival tricks, affords the reader, through a glass darkly, "a means of studying the other side of the psyche by exploring how spectator is never outside of what she perceives", and therefore can never see herself seeing, or like herself liking (Freeman 30). This blind spot is useful to help the reader theorize the fluid, untenable space that constitutes the foundation of the imperative (which capitalism necessarily obfuscates) that "to know itself at all, a subject must enter into a dialectical oscillation between object and subject, a dialectic of loss and restoration" (Pye 60).

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