From Recusancy to Apostasy:
Donne's "Satyre III"
and "Satyre V"

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"To my satyrs there belongs some feare," Donne once wrote to Henry Wotton.¹ Of what would this fear consist, if not of their explicitly pro-Catholic polemic, putting them at odds, politically as well as doctrinally, with the Protestant Monarchy? Indeed, listing the anti-Catholic legislation enacted from 1581 to 1606, the Ellesmere manuscripts suggest just how dangerous an open espousal of the Old Faith might be:

A. Comming and being: treason.
B. Practicing and seducing: treason.
C. Knowing and not discovering a Jesuit or priest: forfaiture 200 li.
D. Receaving and mainteyning within the realm: felonye.
E. Releiving those that be beyonde seas: praemunire.
F. Preists submitting not to come within 10 myles of the Courte. Forfaiture: to loose the benefit of their submission to be voyde. . . .
K. Recusants convicted not to come to the Courte nor to abide within 10 myles of London. Forfaite: 100 li.
L. Recusants convicted confined departing etc. Forfait: all goods and chattels, proffites of landes during life. . . .
P. Having or pretending to have any authority to withdrawe, etc., or to move them to promise obedience to the Pope: treason. . . .
Q. For absolving and reconcyling, using any bull, writing, bulles, instruments or authority from Rome. . . : treason. Aydors and comforters: praemunire.
R. Oathe.²
“Satyre IV” makes continual reference to such legislation, observing the penalty for attending “Masse,” a substantial one of a “hundred markes, which is the Statutes curse” (9-10), the xenophobia of justices for whom foreigners or “Strangers” (26) are immediately suspected as Jesuit missionaries (27-29), and the “Pursevant[s]” (216) or spies employed to enforce these anti-Catholic measures, people who “make men speake treason” (46)—one of whom the poet himself confronts in his visit to court. Such allusions become even more significant if, as I have argued elsewhere, the poet presents himself as one whose religion would keep him from court, under penalty of law. Indeed, feeling himself “becomming Traytor,” the poet goes so far as to imagine himself literally swallowed up by “one of our Giant Statutes” (132). What sort of statute would this be, if not one directed against recusants? In what would the danger consist, if not in practicing—and needing to conceal—his religious beliefs?

Not surprisingly, the fourth satire is most often connected with pro-Catholic polemic; Thomas Hester, for example, calls it “Donne’s boldest commentary on his own situation in the 1590’s through its equivocal but consistent glances at the predicament of the Catholic in Elizabethan England.” Yet it is to the third satire, I suggest, that the “feare” Donne expresses might especially belong, for it is no less than treasonous in its outright rejection of Royal Supremacy. Ronald B. Corthell describes the argument underlying “Satyre III,” the poet’s dilemma being “his proper relation to power, not his commitment to religious truth.” Indeed, though it exhorts readers to “Seeke true religion” (43), devoting some of its most memorable imagery to the search, the poem is hardly a guide for such a quest; one learns little more than the aridor of the journey. The only sufficient description of theme, then, is that “Satyre III” deals