

Wit, humor, and Elizabethan coping: Sir John Harington and *The Metamorphosis of Ajax*

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Abstract

*Elizabethan courtier and author Sir John Harington (1560–1612) published his satirical exposé of toilets and toileting titled *The Metamorphosis of Ajax* in 1596. Notorious in his own time as an inveterate wit and social commentator, Harington used humor to defuse tensions at the court of Elizabeth I and assert alternative possibilities through a variety of extroverted comic performances. In so doing, Harington purposely “played the fool” from a position of aristocratic privilege that reverses usual cognitive expectations, as in the relentless ironies of *The Metamorphosis of Ajax*. Integrating biographical, critical, and clinical approaches to the psychology of Harington’s humor, we historicize Harington within his own literary and cultural milieu and apply the Coping Responses Inventory (a standardized diagnostic tool of clinical psychology) to Harington as subject. In so doing, we purposely integrate literary and scientific approaches to examine ideas of wit, humor, and coping in relation to Harington’s characteristic personal procedures. His postured ironies as a wise fool, asserting personal freedom, correlate with the coping strategies of an active courtier experiencing political stress. Indeed, Sir John Harington’s comical innovations in language and action provide comment upon the Elizabethan political world at the same time as they provide relief from that distressing world.*

*Keywords: Harington, Sir John (1560–1612); *The Metamorphosis of Ajax* (1596), criticism and interpretation; Humor, psychological approaches to; Coping strategies; Elizabethan comedy; Elizabethan culture.*