

From Nonsense to Sense: An Exploration of Creativity in the 17th Century

----- Act I -----

Four men are lined up downstage. From left to right they are: Newton, Hooke, Boyle, Milton. Minimal furniture, lights create separate regions for each. For the duration of these scenes, they stand, all speaking directly to the audience. Initially, the lights in each region are dim, but sufficient for the audience to see all of the men.

[Lights up on Boyle]

Boyle: Francis just revealed to me that he spent last night with a whore. How can he stand to touch those.. those demons!?! I just don't understand. Those beings that he calls "whores" are in fact the Spawn of Satan, sent here to speed the fall of man. When Christ died to redeem us, the Devil realized he needed more powerful temptresses to bring men to his side. And so he sent forth his legions of demons, cleverly disguised as prostitutes, and they spread throughout the world undetected and unnoticed. [pause, then screams] It's not natural! It's disgusting and ungodly! He has to stop this. The fool. This isn't a game. The devil tempts him, and he just falls for it? But God has given me the light to see.

[lights down on Boyle]

[lights up on Milton]

Milton: I am in a boat in a lake, somewhere up north. A naked woman walks across the water and gives me a gift. She looks as if she lives here, in the lake. As if she can breathe under water, if she wanted. She controls the lake, and everything in it. The water is perfectly calm, because she makes it so. It caresses the sandy shores, and not a single wave breaks the stillness. There is no wind, but I can feel the air rushing out of her path as she comes toward me. I see a rocky island behind her, in the center of the lake, with a single pine tree. And the whole lake is surrounded by forested hills, blanketed by a thin layer of mist. The sky above me is lit more by the stars than by the new moon. I can see the quill as she offers it to me, and thus I know this is a dream! I can see! I thought she would give me a sword, but it is a large purple plume, well sharpened. She says nothing, and I take it. I can't break the silence, not even to give thanks. Once I have the quill, she begins to slowly sink into the lake. I see a king riding through a shower of flowers... a golden-haired queen with a man at her side... knights surrounding a large round table... a jeweled

chalice in the fire. [pause] I watch her eyes as she slides below the water, which closes over her upturned faced without the slightest ripple.

[lights down on Milton]

[lights up on Newton]

Newton: Is light physical? I can block it with my hand, but what does it actually consist of? Little particles, like dust, driven by some force? [pause] I have designed an experiment to test this hypothesis. If light consists of corpuscles, then it exerts a force on the eye which enables vision. It would thus be pressure that causes the sensation of light. [Newton pulls out a darning needle and, very carefully, probes around the outside of his eyeball, pressing on his eye]. Yes!! I can see!

[lights down on Newton]

----- Act II -----

Lights out. In the darkness:

Milton: Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making.

Lights dimly on. Hooke is peering into his microscope.

[Lights up on Hooke and Newton]

Newton: [with as much courtesy as he can bolster] Robert.

Hooke: [not looking up from microscope] Mr. Newton.

Newton: Please, call me Isaac.

Hooke: [looking up, annoyed] Whatever you wish, Mr. Newton. [back to microscope]

Newton: Very well. Robert, I don't understand why you insist on taking credit for what I have rightfully proven first.

Hooke: Who knew mold could be so beautiful?

Newton: [indicating the microscope] Who knew you could be so frivolous?

Hooke: I don't care if you "proved" it first. I saw it first, and I presented it to the Royal Society first. That's what matters. You're not the only man who understands optics here.

Newton: Robert, you must be willing to accept that if you cannot mathematically state what you have seen, you may as well have not seen it. Do you understand why white light is composed of many colors? No, of course you don't.

Hooke: Just because nobody understands your math doesn't mean it's right. What I have observed cannot be taken away from me, unlike your theories.

Newton: Your observations may make for a good show at Royal Society meetings, but without explanation, they are just entertainment. Not science. It is in the analysis of observations that true knowledge lies. Brahe made more observations in a lifetime than I ever will, but the world remembers those who analyzed his data: Kepler, Galileo. Anyone can write what they see, but only great minds can understand. And that's something that requires more mathematics and philosophy than you will ever be capable of.

Hooke: Mr. Newton, if you'll kindly look into this microscope, you'll notice a peculiarity near the edge of the slide. If light were made up of corpuscles only, as you say, then there would be only one spectrum. However, there are beautiful ribbons of color here --- the spectra repeat periodically. Why would particles do that? [pause while Newton looks down] I may not understand what is happening, but I do understand that your equations do not account for this.

[lights down on Hooke and Newton]

[lights up on Boyle and Milton]

Boyle: Dreams about naked women are rarely from God.

Milton: Oh, Robert. You're such a prude. Her nudity was not a sin; rather it was a symbol of her purity.

Boyle: Purity! How can a naked woman be called chaste? What was she but a

heathen temptress?

Milton: She gave Arthur the sword that protected him all his life. That's a good act.

Boyle: God protected Arthur, not some enchanted sword.

Milton: This is a story, not reality.

Boyle: I don't approve of fairy tales with naked women in them. I'm afraid, John. I know the Devil has his methods to bring us all down with him. Not all of the women in this world are really women, you know. Some were crafted by Satan himself, and those are the most enticing of all. You say you were captivated by this woman's beauty in your dream... I fear she must have been a demon.

Milton: I can suspend disbelief for quite a while, but this demon theory goes far beyond reality.

Boyle: It makes perfect sense if you assume the Devil is more cunning than we are.

Milton: But where have you heard of this? I do not recall any evidence in Scripture of such a thing.

Boyle: It is not in Scripture. It is a scheme so clever that the saints did not realize it when they wrote the Bible.

Milton: [coughs] Uh, Robert, you realize this is crazy, right? Don't you think God would have told the saints if that were true? I think perhaps you should trust in what knowledge we have been blessed with in the Good Book. Don't go invent your own.

Boyle: But---

Milton: Living a good life is important. But it rarely entails being unjust with half of the people in the world! There is no point in being paranoid.

Boyle: [thoughtful] I suppose you have a point. [pause] I guess there is no reason to believe it. [pause] But demon or not, I don't think God wanted you to write about this woman. If He did, you would have written something by now.

Milton: [Sigh] That's true. I hope it is not because He doesn't want me to write at all.

Boyle: No, no! I don't think so.

Milton: I chose Arthur because I want to write something really grand, something that encompasses many stories, like Homer's Odyssey. An epic. I want it to be outside the realm of time. But nothing Greek or Roman; that just doesn't feel as real to me.

Boyle: Epic outside the realm of time... How about something before time began?

Milton: Such as?

Boyle: Something praising God?

Milton: [devilishly] Ooooh. You'll like this. Man, as he is tempted by the Devil to fall from grace.

Boyle: Don't mock me!

Milton: [laughs] The idea might work though. Do you have any paper?
[starts writing and wanders back to his area]