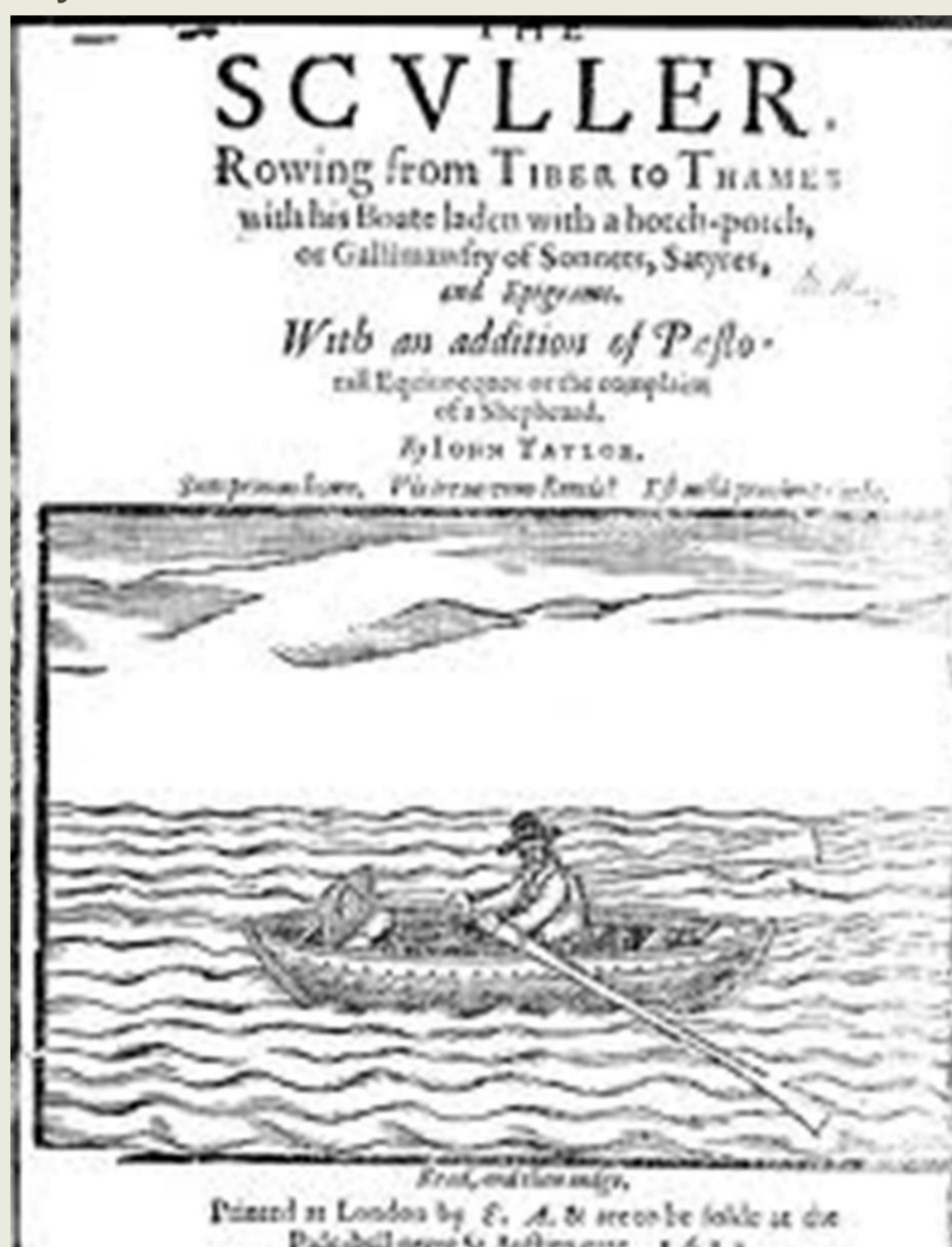


# How Does John Taylor The Water-Poet break the mould of 17th century poetry?

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## *The 17<sup>th</sup> century literary landscape*

The dominant view of poetry in the early 17th century was 'poetry, imagined as the product of an aristocratic social ethos, sustained and policed the social boundaries that defined 'equals or near equals in social status. Writing private poetry was thus an act of social classification' (Wendy Wall, *The Imprint of Gender*, Cornell University Press 1993 p. 13). Much poetry from this period was therefore circulated in manuscript form, and sometimes published posthumously. Even among the poets who did publish in their lifetime, such as Ben Jonson, considerable effort was put into making their work appear sufficiently literary.



## *John Taylor The Water-Poet*

The extraordinarily prolific John Taylor The Water Poet (1578-1653) is unusual within this context in a number of ways. Firstly, his pastoral sounding title 'The Water Poet' was an allusion to his day job as a waterman on the Thames, which makes him a rare example of a named working class poet from the 17th century. (There were, of course, many anonymous working class poets, for example, the authors of Broadside Ballads) Between 1611 and the 1650s, in the form of cheap pamphlets, he published 'Roughly 150 separate titles' of which there were 'probably over half a million individual copies' (Bernard Capp, *The World of John Taylor the Water-Poet*, Clarendon Press 1994) He raised money for publishing these pamphlets via his use of a 'subscription' or 'wager' model. He would propose an undertaking, arrange for people to pay him if he completed it and promise delivery of a pamphlet when he had done so.

## *Wagers, subscriptions and money*

These wagers, and the subscribers and whether they paid him are frequently discussed within his poetry, for example the full title of *The Praise of Hempseed*: 'THE PRAISE OF HEMP-SEED WITH The Voyage of Mr. Roger Bird and the Writer hereof, in a Boat of browne-Paper, from London to Quinborough in Kent. As also, a Farewell to the matchlesse deceased Mr. THOMAS CORIAT. The Profits arising by Hemp-seed are: Cloathing, Food, Fishing, Shipping, Pleasure, Profit, Iustice, Whipping.' (John Taylor. *The Praise of Hemp-seed*, 1620)

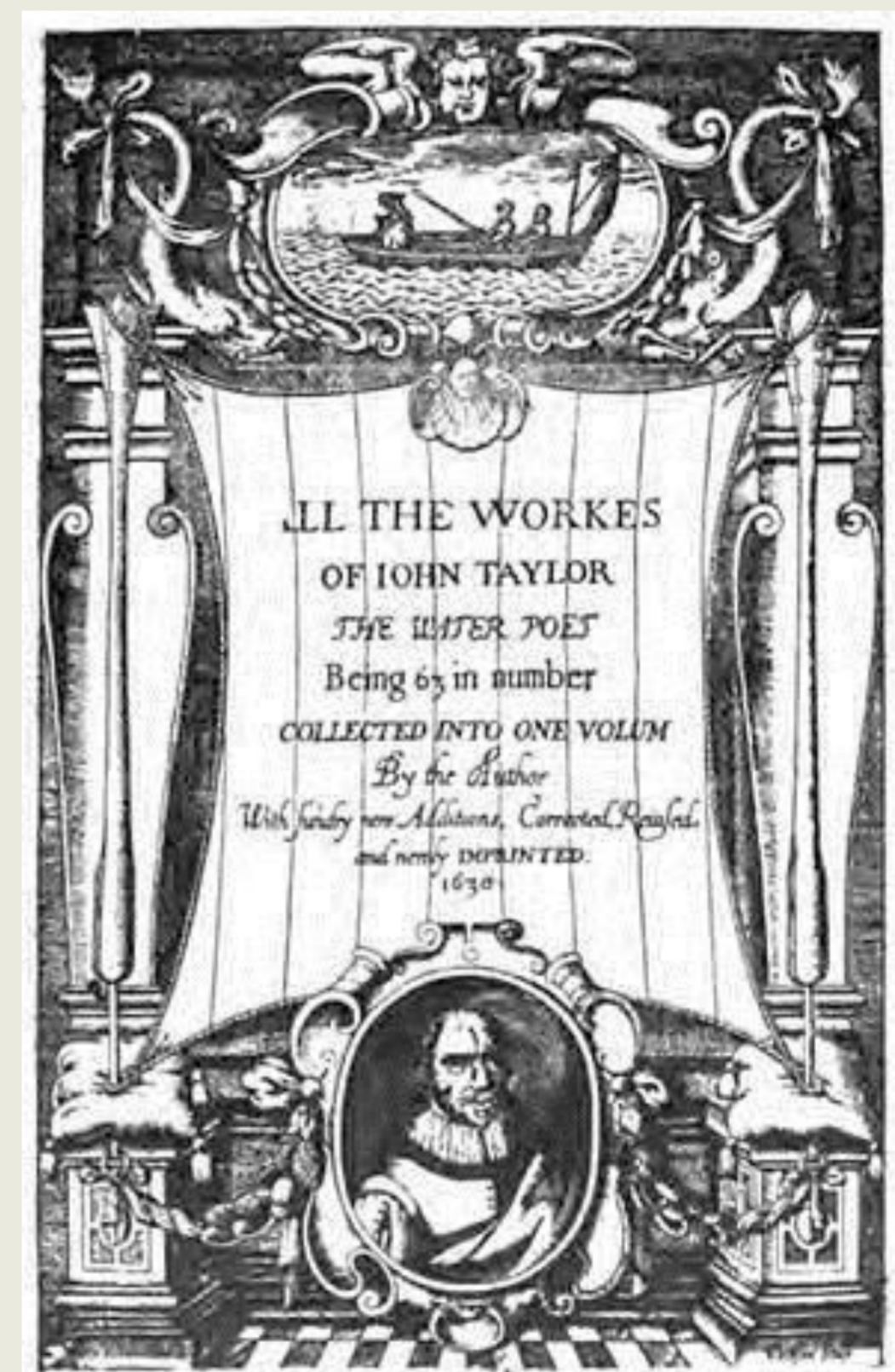
Taylor is therefore using his adventures via these wagers as a form of advertising, people may have heard of his voyage in a paper boat, and therefore seek to buy a pamphlet when they realise that it is written by the same John Taylor.

The use of the boat is an example of how Taylor allows himself be identified with the river and with his trade. Another clear example is shown in his early pamphlet, *The Sculler* (1611) with the frontispiece showing him at work on the river. He also is aware of his unusual class status as a writer, and counters it head on. For example, this early passage from *The Praise of Hempseed*:

*'Me thinks I heare some knauish foolish head,  
Accuse, condemne, and judge before hee read :  
Saying, the fellow that the fame hath made,  
Is a mechanicke Waterman by trade :  
And therefore it cannot worth reading be,  
Being compil'd by such an one as he'*

He goes on to list great writers who have tackled similarly 'base' topics as hempseed.

*'A thousand Writers for their art renown'd  
Houe made farre baser things their studies ground.'*



## *A Poetic Original*

Taylor, therefore, is unusual in that he is not only a mould breaking labouring poet who, through his use of subscriptions and discussion of payment for his work within it, constructs his poetry as labour, just as much as a his work as a waterman. He also uses his arriviste status, as a labourer who is not expected to write poetry, and of a showman fond of outrageous stunts such as

*"I therefore to conclude this much will note  
How I of Paper lately made a Boat,  
And how in forme of Paper I did row  
From London vnto Quinborough Ile show...  
(In such a Boat which neuer had a fellow)"*

He constructs himself as a poetic original, who, like his paper boat 'never had a fellow'. Such an original, in fact, that he self published his own complete works.