

Fairy-tales, Form, and the Future of Marston Studies (A Response to Brownell Salomon)

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Nearly twenty years ago Brownell Salomon and I published essays on John Marston's *The Malcontent* in the same journal within the space of a year.¹ Salomon traced Calvinist themes and image patterns; I traced a redemptive pattern of confession, contrition, and satisfaction in the play. We were not responding to one another (there was no journal called *Connotations* back then); religion was in the air surrounding Renaissance drama. That critical weather system has, however, been somewhat pushed out of the region by the warm fronts of poststructuralism and the new historicism wafting in from France, California, and elsewhere.² Some new kinds of questions (or at least questions that challenge some old assumptions about a playwright like Marston) are being asked about the drama produced in early modern England. Is it helpful now to talk about "characters who are quite lifelike" (Salomon 161), a dichotomy of "form and content" (153), "units of structure and content that occur only in an invariate, concatenated order" (158), and "a sense of something behind, more real than any of the personages and their action" (Salomon quoting T. S. Eliot, 151 and 161-62)? While I applaud Professor Salomon's desire to "win new appreciation for *The Malcontent's* achievement" (153), I am worried that his project and future Marston studies may become mired in some terribly sticky old methods.

Salomon launches his essay from the premise that *The Malcontent* has no known narrative source. He is unimpressed by "situational resemblance[s]" (151) with plots involving figures of authority disguised in order to spy out corruption in the realm, a story that hit the stage late in Elizabeth's reign and grew in theatrical popularity throughout James's.³ Instead, Salomon loops around the question of Marston's plot with the larger question of the "doubleness" of the play's "formal

and thematic structure" (151), which he views as its prime virtue and distinguishing mark. The doubleness is revealed, he argues, in contrasts between the moral earnestness of the usurped-duke plot and the "jocular, often parodistic attitude towards formal elements" of the drama (153), by which he means a kind of theatrical self-consciousness about matters of characterization, dramatic language, and plot structure. In the area of characterization, for example, Salomon describes Malvole as "'stagey' humour character" on one hand and disillusioned duke on the other (155). He describes certain characters' penchant for highly patterned dramatic language as laughably at odds with the "dead earnest ethical point[s]" they are making (156). Finally, he moves to his *pièce de résistance*, a formalist analysis of parallels between the play's main plot and the parts of the Returning Hero fairy-tale as enumerated by Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928; English translation, 1958). He concludes that this fairy-tale plot provides Marston a comic resolution that points in the opposite direction from his theme of moral corruption:

Marston thus evinces his doubleness, on the level of thematic content, by the authentic pessimism and disgust with which he limns a sin-ridden milieu . . . and on the level of technique by the unstudied advantage he gains from the optimistic teleology of the fairy-tale form. (161)

The precise nature of the interaction between pessimistic theme and optimistic technique does not emerge clearly from the conclusion of the essay, however. We are left with the suggestion that "the fairy-tale form is the 'something behind'" the play that Eliot mystifyingly postulated half a century ago.

Such a brief summary cannot hope to do justice to the carefully laid out argument of the essay, but it may serve to point up some of the critical assumptions that shape the way we are being encouraged to read Marston. First, there is the assumption that there are two sides to every story, character, theme, and tone generated by Marston, indeed, two sides to John Marston. Second, that there are essential qualities to his characters and plots. Third, that narrative linearity is one of these essential qualities. And fourth, that there lurks behind Marston's play something like a Platonic form, more real than the casually tossed off speeches and hastily improvised actions that

frequently meet the eye and ear of the theater goer. I have stated these critical assumptions starkly, without mollifying qualifications, and I hasten to acknowledge that Professor Salomon has not plunged headlong into each of the four critical traps. Still, more than a hint of each one appears in "The 'Doubleness' of *The Malcontent* and Fairy-Tale Form."

Why must critics always be on the look-out for "doubleness," contrasting pairs, dichotomies? Why not triptychs, as in Mark Rose's structural model, or, better yet, a wide range of disparate experiences encompassing the heroic, the satiric, the tragic, the lyric, the comic in Marston? Surely Mendoza's character, assembled as it is from the rag and bone bag of theatrical types, has more than the two facets labelled by Salomon: "innocuous . . . *alazon*" and "menacing villain" (155). What one finds with Mendoza is that he can be revolting, indifferent, charming, misogynist, silly, and a great many other things, all by turns. Nor does Aurelia have just the two faces of Janus (155). Between "witty histrionism" and "moral fervency" (155), a darker vein and a lighter one (157), pessimism and optimism (161), Marston paints with an enormous range of colors and tones—passionate sensuality, world-weariness, pompous erudition—but they often go unrecorded amidst the essay's insistent dichotomizing. Even Marston's very limited corpus of erudite and outrageous verse satires, a "quasi-pageant,"⁴ various comedies, and tragic potboilers reveals far more than the doubleness emphasized here.

The quest for what Salomon sees as the essence of Marston's aesthetic can obliterate his creative genius and the ways that he wildly transgresses the bounds of authority, theatrical tradition, and good taste. If some of his characters' rhetoric is built on balanced repetitions such as *isocolon* and *parison* (156), other speeches grow almost haphazardly from unpremeditated invective, gushing flattery, and sudden panic. There is no more sense of rigidly controlled, linear unfolding of action in Marston's plotting technique than there is consistency in his characterizations or firm rhetorical control over his dramatic language. While it is certainly possible to force the plot of *The Malcontent* into the procrustean bed of "nine consecutive points of narrative-characterological action (Function Nos. 23-32 [sic] of Propp's model)," what have we got once the exercise is done (158)?

Folklorists have known for decades that everything from the *Odyssey* to comic strips can depict a hero returning home, confronting a false hero, performing difficult tasks, being recognized, and so forth. But this universalizing, or rather Indo-Europeanizing *gestalt* tells us far less about any particular literary text or playscript than the local pressures that bent its form away from the conventional, the irreversible, and the linear. Increasingly I am coming to think that what is needed for the analysis of Marston's plays, in particular, is not a method that emphasizes submission to dominant cultural patterns of story-telling and moral value, but a rigorously historicized approach to his locally outrageous transgressions of such patterns. Marston is at his best when he is representing the nether regions of his particular late-Elizabethan, early-Jacobean body politic.

Allowing the newly arrived (not returned) King James I and VI and his Scottish lairds no period of grace in London (the play dates from 1603-04), Marston sets his foul-minded procuress Maquerelle to mocking them:

BIANCA. And is not Signor St Andrew Jaques a gallant fellow now?

MAQUERELLE. By my maidenhead, la, honour and he agrees as well together as a satin suit and woollen stockings.

EMILIA. But is not Marshal Make-room, my servant in reversion, a proper gentleman?

MAQUERELLE. Yes, in reversion, as he had his office; as, in truth, he hath all things in reversion: he has his mistress in reversion, his clothes in reversion, his wit in reversion, and, indeed, is a suitor to me for my dog in reversion. But, in good verity, la, he is as proper a gentleman in reversion as—and, indeed, as fine a man as may be, having a red beard and a pair of warped legs.

(*The Malcontent* 5.4.29-44)⁵

The slurs against bandy-legged James Stuart and his uncouth, woollen-stockinged pretenders to courtliness is palpable in the phrase, "St Andrew Jaques," a phrase altered by the censors in the later quartos. The political and sexual barbarism suspected of the Scots is harped on repeatedly in the expression "in reversion," suggesting further ranges of transgression with each repetition. Pointed language of this kind relentlessly destabilizes the religious perspectives in Marston's play. Marston is lavish and immediate in his obscenity, and no amount of critical balancing can produce a convincing universal

message to restrain and in-form his play's raw, grotesque satiric power.⁶

A sample or two of Marston's transgressive approach to writing plays is not in itself likely to convince anyone committed to Salomon's method of plot/character analysis to shift to a more historicized view of the drama. Nor would it help the cause of Marston criticism to pretend that there is a single approach that will produce uniformly enlightening reading of the plays and poems. Marston was a skilled and self-conscious writer; he artfully concentrated and shaped and heightened his own experience of the world. He absorbed the practices, even much of the phraseology, of his contemporaries in the theater, and he also added his own quirky, extravagant touches when the censors would let him. In our own time we should be wary of attempts to constrain his extravagant art with a critical method that abstracts from the text a set of stereotypical, universal, or conventional elements, thereby robbing it of its vitalizing co-dependence with the social and political world from which it sprang.

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NOTES

¹Brownell Salomon, "The Theological Basis of Imagery and Structure in *The Malcontent*," *SEL* 14 (1974): 271-84; William W. E. Slights, "'Elder in a deform'd church': The Function of Marston's *Malcontent*," *SEL* 13 (1973): 360-73.

²Bracing back-drafts of theological interpretation are still being felt, though. See, for example, Roy Battenhouse's trenchant, single-minded assault on Leah Marcus's political puzzling out of Shakespeare in *Connotations* 1.2 (1991): 197-203.

³One of the contemporary tales that may have enhanced the popularity of the "duke-in-disguise" plot involves Thomas Middleton (not the dramatist), who took to mingling disguised among London low-lives during his term as sheriff. Richard Johnson's pamphlet, *Looke on me London: I am an Honest English-man, ripping vp the Bowels of Mischiefe, lurking in thy Sub-vrbs and Precincts* (London: N. O[kes], 1613), remarks in the dedication to Middleton, by then Lord Mayor of London,

. . . in the first yeare of the Kings Maiesties Reigne (your Lordship being then Shrieve of this Cittie) you made your Visitations in the Sub-vrbs, and out-places of the Precincts of London, to enquire after euil liuers, and by Iustice stroue to root out iniquity, which good beginning will eternize your glory, and establish prosperity in this worthy Cittie. (sig. A3)

⁴In *John Marston of the Middle Temple: An Elizabethan Dramatist in his Social Setting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1969), Philip Finkelpearl calls *Histriomastix* "a quasi-pageant for the edification and glorification of his [Inns of Court] Society and his Queen" (122).

⁵The first move in any study of *The Malcontent* is to acknowledge the instability of the text(s). Salomon has chosen to use G. K. Hunter's Revels edition (London: Methuen, 1975). I have preferred the version prepared by Macdonald P. Jackson and Michael Neill for *The Selected Plays of John Marston* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986). These editors, following the scholarly lead of David J. Lake, have given us QC as augmented by Marston, relegating the Induction and five substantial but somewhat disruptive editions, most likely by John Webster, to an appendix.

⁶I tend to believe, along with Alvin Kernan (*The Plot of Satire* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1965]) that an absurd, unsightly image is more likely to be the principle of organization in satire than is a coherent narrative line.

Connotations

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Contents of Volume 1 (1991)

<i>Piers Plowman</i> , Numerical Composition, and the Prophecies ARTHUR VERSLUIS	103
Gematria in <i>Piers Plowman</i> (A Response to Arthur Versluis) JOHN P. HERMANN	164
Duality in <i>Piers Plowman</i> and the Anglo-Saxon Riddles (A Response to Arthur Versluis) GWENDOLYN MORGAN	168
Comments on Arthur Versluis, “ <i>Piers Plowman</i> , Numerical Composition, and the Prophecies” ERIC KOOPER	283
*	
Arthur Golding and the Elizabethan Progress of Actaeon’s Dogs ANTHONY BRIAN TAYLOR	207
*	
<i>Doctor Faustus</i> : Death of a Bibliophile PAUL BUDRA	1
<i>Doctor Faustus</i> and the Literary System: A Supplementary Response to Paul Budra PAUL YACHNIN	74
Doctor Faustus and Intertextuality (A Response to Paul Budra and Paul Yachnin) MARK THORNTON BURNETT	173

<i>Doctor Faustus: The Play-Text or the Play?</i> (A Reply to Mark Thornton Burnett)	286
PAUL BUDRA	
*	
Mnemonic Criticism & Renaissance Literature: A Manifesto	12
WILLIAM E. ENGEL	
*	
"If you have tears . . .": Oxford and Onions	181
ERIC SAMS	
*	
Religion in <i>King John</i> : Shakespeare's View	140
ROY BATTENHOUSE	
A Response to Roy Battenhouse, "Religion in <i>King John</i> : Shakespeare's View"	290
SANDRA BILLINGTON	
*	
"M.O.A.I." Trying to Share the Joke in <i>Twelfth Night</i> 2.5 (A Critical Hypothesis)	78
INGE LEIMBERG	
More About Laughing at "M.O.A.I." (A Response to Inge Leimberg)	187
JOHN RUSSELL BROWN	
Maria's Theology and Other Questions (An Answer to John Russell Brown)	191
INGE LEIMBERG	
Count Malvolio, Machevill and Vice	224
MATTHIAS BAUER	
*	
On <i>Puzzling Shakespeare</i> by Leah Marcus	197
ROY BATTENHOUSE	
*	

The "Doubleness" of <i>The Malcontent</i> and Fairy-tale Form BROWNELL SALOMON	150
Fairy-tales, Form, and the Future of Marston Studies (A Response to Brownell Salomon) WILLIAM W. E. SLIGHTS	302
*	
A Response to Margreta de Grazia, "Homonyms before and after Lexical Standardization" MANFORD HANOWELL	293
Response to Manford Hanowell's Response to "Homonyms before and after Lexical Standardization" MARGRETA DE GRAZIA	299
*	
The Head and the Hands on the Rostra: <i>Marcus Tullius Cicero</i> as a Sign of Its Time DALE B. J. RANDALL	34
Charles I, Cromwell and Cicero (A Response to Dale B. J. Randall) JOHN MORRILL	96
Once More to the Rostra (An Answer to John Morrill) DALE B. J. RANDALL	204
*	
The Language of Hell THOMAS F. MERRILL	244
*	
Plague, Fire, and Typology in Defoe's <i>A Journal of the Plague Year</i> ALAN ROSEN	258
*	
The Art of Fiction and the Art of War: Henry James, H. G. Wells, and Ford Madox Ford JOSEPH WIESENFARTH	55