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Towards Tolerant Pluralism in Renaissance Drama Studies (An Answer to William W. E. Slights)*

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William W. E. Slights' cross-grained reading of the central point of my essay may unintentionally have been abetted by a minor change in my original manuscript made at a late stage of the editorial process. At the editor's urging, I willingly revised the conclusion with the intention of giving greater prominence to the suggestion that *The Malcontent*'s fairy-tale form was perhaps the basis for the doubleness T. S. Eliot ascribed to the play. Regrettably, that final emphasis was achieved at the expense of the fuller closure of the original. Slights' objection to the published version runs as follows:

> 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. (303)

My original final paragraph had afforded a clearer sense of Marston's overall artistic purpose, and it is offered here:

> Thus while Marston exploits universal aspects of comic form in *The Malcontent* with a self-aware grasp of their typicality and familiarity—the fairy-tale structure and personae homologous to the *Odyssey*, genre conventions, theatrical character types, and rhetorical stylization—he also authorizes these selfsame elements to convey the play's serious values. It is a parodistic, ludic approach which ought not to be taken for flippancy. The doubleness of Marston, in the sense of an unexpected disjunction between form and content, provides a

*Reference: Brownell Salomon, "The 'Doubleness' of *The Malcontent* and Fairy-tale Form," *Connotations* 1.2 (1991): 150-63; William W. E. Slights, "Fairy-tales, Form, and the Future of Marston Studies," *Connotations* 1.3 (1991): 302-07.

standpoint from which to enlarge our perspective on his quirky yet thoughtful masterwork.

But in any event, even without that recapitulation my essay in its entirety is clear on the point that analysis is confined to the unique form and meaning of *The Malcontent*, and that there is no intention of extending it to any other Marston play. It is puzzling and wholly without justification, then, for Slights to charge me with making "the assumption that there are two sides to every story, character, theme, and tone generated by Marston, indeed, two sides to John Marston" (303). I did maintain, however, that two extant admissions in the playwright's own words are incontrovertible signposts to his method: his penchant for "serious jest and jesting seriousness" in the literary scourging of "beastliness," and his confession on another occasion that he allowed himself "to affect (a little too much) to be seriously fantastical." More convincing proof that Marston could "affect" a deliberately paradoxical, two-pronged, simultaneously ludic and earnest approach to serious topics would be impossible to imagine. My aim was to reveal it as the controlling method in *The Malcontent*.

In exasperation Slights asks the rhetorical question, "Why must critics always be on the look-out for 'doubleness,' contrasting pairs, dichotomies?" Bearing in mind the well-known fact that humanity's binary thinking process is observable even in ancient Greece,[1] I venture an answer with respect to my own endeavor that might be extended to literary criticism in general. Of necessity the answer is a contingent one. Antinomies or dichotomies do constitute a valid unifying strategy—and are not merely an arbitrary imposition—only if a commentator can persuade us of their validity by the sheer weight of supporting evidence, by its compelling variety and consistency (e.g., most if not all of the work's major characters, its manifest rhetorical or imagistic texture, key formal elements like plot-structure, generic categorizations), and especially by the presence of authenticating external knowledges from biography or history. I hold my essay up to judgment by all of those measures, particularly the matter of historical corroboration.

Indeed, Slights believes that my close analysis of the way Marston employs self-conscious literariness in *The Malcontent* is somehow

inconsistent with "a rigorously historicized approach" to the play in relation to its milieu. But ironically, after raising the banner of the New Historicism and saluting its catchphrase ("local pressures"), Slights proceeds to surrender his one illustrative example to an historical misconception. Specifically, he argues that Maquerelle's satiric comments in *The Malcontent* (5.5.24 ff.; Revels ed.) relative to "sexual and political barbarism at court" have a Jacobean topicality, and that such "Pointed language of this kind relentlessly destabilizes the religious perspectives in Marston's play" (305). That is simply not the case. In my "Doubleness" essay I invoke my earlier analysis of the play precisely because it establishes the historical context of Marston's fideistic religious earnestness and its inseparability from his satirical impulse. I quote there at length from *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*, whose author Theodore Spencer points out the

> striking fact that the three chief satirists of the 1590's, Donne, Hall, and Marston, men who used literature to expose the evil in human nature, all ended in the Anglican Church. Hall became a clergyman about 1600, Marston in 1608, and Donne in 1614. And though we know nothing about Marston's ecclesiastical views, it is significant that both Hall and Donne occupied a religious position that was the logical consequence of the skeptical attitude toward man of Montaigne in his 'Apology for Raymond Sebond.'[2]

Not surprisingly, both Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* and *The Fawne* have three borrowings from the latter Montaigne essay alone. Moreover, we know that John Calvin wrote only one poem during his life, and that poem contained an imitation of Juvenal. Thus it would appear that the defining attributes of the satirist, savage indignation and topicality, not only do not destabilize expressions of conservative religious attitudes in satirical literature but indeed work hand in glove with them.

Slights is not the only New Historicist who wrongly assumes that critical readings attentive to formalistic detail universally exempt themselves from assessing the impact of topical circumstances or the cultural milieu upon the text. Leah S. Marcus, for instance, insists that a "massive unease" with topicality is associated with "twentieth-century formalist methodologies—New Criticism, for example, which tended to view all attempts at 'local' reading as incompatible with the essential

nature of literature as a thing apart."[3] In an endnote (223n26) we learn the "key text" which constitutes her sole, all-purpose offending example: Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn*, written over four decades ago! That sample is about as judicious as comparing the Model T and the Concorde as modern forms of transportation. Biased thinking of this kind is only too easily refuted, however; citations to historically predicated, text-centered, recent interpretive analyses of English Renaissance plays and masques abound in my book-length bibliographic guide for Garland Press in 1991.

How best, then, to serve the future of Renaissance drama studies? Slights calls for a "shift to a more historicized view of the drama" generally, and for "a rigorously historicized approach" to Marston's plays in particular (306, 305). But surely no single methodology can offer itself as the cure-all of criticism, especially one whose rigor is so frankly subject to the vagaries of its practitioners. I am rather more comfortable with tolerant pluralism, whereby one or more approaches—cultural materialist, feminist, folkloric, structuralist, performative, and so forth—may compel our allegiance by demonstrating interactions with the playtext at as many points as possible.

Finally, thanks go to Slights for pointing out a typographic error: the series of Propp's Functions given on page 158 should of course be numbered 23-31, not 23-32.

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NOTES

[1]See G. E. R. Lloyd, *Polarity and Analogy: Two Types of Argumentation in Early Greek Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1966).

[2]Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*, 2nd ed. (1949; rpt. New York: Collier Books, 1967) 203-04, quoted in my essay, "The Theological Basis of Imagery and Structure in *The Malcontent*," *SEL* 14 (1974): 271-84.

[3]Leah S. Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988) 32.