“Furor Poeticus” — Marston and his Contemporaries

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Marston’s contemporaries viewed him from the start as combative. He gave them good reason. Almost all the available evidence about his life connects him with theatrical rivalries, imprisonment, brawls, controversy, highway robbery and insult. Quite often he is on the receiving end of all this, but frequently too he is the deliberate aggressor. One instance is recalled in the diary of the law student John Manningham:

John Marston, the last Christmas he danced with Alderman More’s wife’s daughter, a Spaniard born, fell into a strange commendation of her wit and beauty. When he had done, she thought to pay him home, and told him she thought he was a poet. "'Tis true," said he, "for poets feign and lie, and so did I when I commended your beauty, for you are exceeding foul." (qtd. in Jackson xiii)

The remark comes to us with minimal context, but as it stands it seems to have been inflicted on an innocent with deliberate intent to give pain. It dates from 1602-03, the one brief period when Manningham kept his diary, and so coincides with the point, half-way through Marston’s career, when many conclude that he was severely chastened. Clashing with Ben Jonson several times in the War of the Theaters, he had come off decidedly the loser after Jonson’s crushing portrayal of him as Crispinus in The Poetaster, and for almost three years wrote nothing more until breaking his silence with The Malcontent in 1604. Yet, Manningham’s anecdote would seem to suggest
that he had lost none of his native ill-will and general contempt. His contemporaries tended to see his work as being equally characterized by an unfocused belligerence. Typical is the Parnassus authors’ parody of him as “Furor Poeticus,” a “ruffian in his style,” who “Cuts, thrusts, and foins at whomsoever he meets,” or their sneering reference to him as “Monsieur Kinsayder . . . lifting [his] leg and pissing against the world” (qtd. in Bullen xxv). John Weever’s indictment of him as a “filthy sweep-chimney of sin” scourging villainies “As boys scourge tops for sport on Lenten day” has a similar ring (qtd. in Allen 17).

Yet, in the last thirty years, many commentators have adopted R. A. Foakes’ argument that Marston, particularly in his plays, is an adroit ironist, mocking the productions of his predecessors, his peers, and his own fictive creations, in ways which therefore create an absurdist distance from his own medium. By such a valuation, Marston is converted into a sophisticated, highly conscious, modern-seeming author.

The argument of this essay will be that Marston’s contemporaries were right, and that there is little that is sophisticated in Marston’s methods. From the first he simply aimed to excel, and in order to do so he committed himself to excess. Specifically, the early quarrel with the verse-satirist, Hall, teaches us that Marston’s true literary aims and qualities were merely contentious. In satire, Marston, like all of his contemporaries, mistakenly believed that the ancients prescribed a lashing, surgically brutal persona. What differentiates him from his fellow-satirists is his insistence on the hostility of his environment as a writer. Indeed, it is more than a refrain: it is his creation. Even where hostility may not originally have existed, Marston labors to provoke it.

In Marston’s first satiric work, Certaine Satyres, he immediately belabors his own readership, those who had in the same volume read his erotic Metamorphosis of Pigmalion’s Image. He calls them “leud Priapians,” and insists that his poem’s appeal to them consists of “Salamanian titillations, / Which tickle [them] up.”