

The Malcontent's Mask and John Marston – A Primer

By James Wallis

“...lifting up your leg and pissing against the world”
- a quote from John Marston's *The Scourge of Villainy*

The veritable pantheon of characters that populate early modern drama in England at the time of Shakespeare is blessed with one of the most eclectic in John Marston: a satirist, a playwright, eventual priest, rabble-rouser, at times prisoner, friend, and enemy. The fascinating history of this playwright's influence on the theatrical economy of Shakespeare, and his sordid dealings with other playwrights like Ben Jonson, make John Marston a character to wonder about. But his work, both strongly theatrical and evasive in impact, is some of the most mesmerizing and unique to encounter.

John Marston was a highly educated individual, who attended the Inns of Court, the residences and working offices of the London barristers. Much to the disappointment of Marston's father, it seems that Marston worked less on learning and practicing law, and more on cementing his place in a thriving literary world, which he wasn't alone in engaging with at the Inns of Court, “the Inns themselves encouraged an interest in drama as an adjunct to the study of rhetoric, while their annual revels made them significant centres of amateur theatrical activity” (*The Selected Plays of John Marston*, edited by Macdonald P. Jackson and Michael Neil, pg. x).

Marston began his career by writing erotic poems and satires, which examined and exposed the follies of the modern world which surrounded him. His ideas were apparently quite controversial, as at some point his works were burned in 1599 as a way to control satiric parody that was verging on social critique. These early satiric works show Marston at his most dramaturgically diverse, and it seems there is a definite desire to “represent states of insane disgust or prurient delight, in combination with a stance of philosophical (Neo-Stoic) detachment and dismissive superiority” (*The Malcontent*, Revels Edition, ed. By G.K Hunter, pg. xix). Because of this fiery censorship, or out of genuine curiosity, Marston is eventually scooped up as a playwright into the theatrical world, tied to the boys companies that were catering to a higher class of audience member, and seemingly more interested in the vitriolic satire that Marston was trying to write.

Writing for the St. Paul's boys, and then eventually for the Children of the Chapel Royal at the Blackfriars, Marston became a powerful member of the theatrical elite. His on and off again friendship with Ben Jonson, which caused him to be imprisoned, and his clear influence on other playwrights of the adult companies, including Shakespeare, show that Marston was fully employed as a singular author and collaborator in the theatre economy. “Marston's theatrical works are marked throughout his career by an unstable balance between an intense vision of evil and folly (embodied in brilliant and excessive poetry, always on the edge of parody) and the theatrical need to present believable situations and tell a story” (*The Malcontent*, Revels student editions, ed. by G.K Hunter, pg. 2).

The Malcontent remains Marston's play that has represented his literary influence. The play was written probably between 1602 and 1604, for the children's company at the Blackfriars.

Clearly the play had some sort of popularity, as it was then published three times in quarto in 1604: the 1st Quarto and 2nd Quarto are essentially the same, the play as played for the Children's of the Chapel Royal at the Blackfriars; but the 3rd Quarto is titled "*The Malcontent Augmented by Marston. With the additions played by the Kings Majesties servants. Written by John Webster 1604.*" This 3rd quarto is the script played by the King's Men, and it includes an Induction with some of the members of the company. This new quarto has significant additions to the script, filling out the play with new moments of character development for Malevole and Mendoza. Also, the new script seems to be fixing theatrical necessities, as the shift from the boys company to the adult King's Men would require closing gaps of musical intermissions with action, and allowing for the new company to use their greatest performers, like Robert Armin who would play the role of the clown Passarello. Some of these additions are believed to be written by Marston, some (including the Induction) were probably written by the playwright John Webster. The play is changed, or inflated, but also made even more self-consciously theatrical.

Therefore, the play is interesting in that it straddled the two worlds of early modern dramatic presentation, "its double theatrical background, as both boys' play and adults' play, helps to make clear the richness of the heritage it draws on and develops" (*The Malcontent*, Revels Edition, ed. By G.K Hunter, pg. lvi). The King's Men were one of the most established and beloved companies in the period, with royal patronage, and the greatest actor of the generation Richard Burbage. The Induction says that the King's Men found this "lost" play, but likely they stole the play in some sort of incident with Marston and the Chapel Royal company. Yet that makes the play even more attractive, because it was thought good enough to come from a company that was involved in a completely different type of theatrical representation than the King's Men adult company, "it seems probable that when the King's Men stole *The Malcontent* from the boys, they believed they were acquiring a play with some claim to public interest. The boys had stolen *Jeronimo* which...could be *The Spanish Tragedy*, the most popular play of the age" (*The Malcontent*, Revels Edition, ed. By G.K Hunter, pg. xxviii).

Marston clearly wrote the original play for his boys company, as it would fit into his theatrical aesthetic, "in conceiving *The Malcontent*, Marston most certainly must have had his actors in mind: children imitating adults reduce the adult world to childishness, and their effect is to add another dimension of absurdity – the most obvious to an audience" (*The Malcontent*, Regents Renaissance Drama edition, ed. by M.L Wine, pg. xxiv). But the play has enough to give theatrically that it was of interest by the adult company, and repurposed for their needs.

The source of the play is rather mysterious, with some Italian plays, such as Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido*, being an influence but not a direct source, as well as Cinthio's play *Selene* offering some parallels with Marston's characterizations. Mostly this play, like the comedies of Ben Jonson, seem to be entrenched in antecedents of English drama, especially former tragic forms, satiric impact, and the flourishing genre of tragicomedy, "Marston's real achievement in *The Malcontent*, in fact, is to assimilate his Italian and classical sources into patterns of English dramatic satire and native revenge tragedy, putting to more effective use motifs that he had used less satisfactorily earlier" (*The Malcontent*, New Mermaids edition, ed. by W. David Kay, pg. xviii).

The play is set in the Italian Court, which is a familiar setting for Marston, who spoke Italian and had an Italian mother. Though the setting is foreign, the focus of parody or satire is very much English, "*The Malcontent* is a striking example of the new satiric tone and moral seriousness that distinguishes English comedy in the early 1600's" and the play "scathingly rebukes the lechery and self-seeking rampant in its courtly world, whose Genoese setting, like the Italian locales in the tragedies of Cyril Tourneur and John Webster, is a thin disguise for the Jacobean court and its vices" (*The Malcontent*, New Mermaids edition, ed. by W. David Kay, pg. ix); moreover, "in Marston's fictitious Genoa the Elizabethan ideal of the court – society at its highest point of refinement – is viewed through disenchanted eyes: we are clearly on the threshold of Jacobean drama. The gulf between what men profess to be and what they are looms large now, so that, as the Prologue warns, who writes of men must write of fools" (*The Malcontent*, Regents Renaissance Drama edition, ed. by M.L Wine, pg. xx).

Marston is pushing against contemporary ideas, notions of folly, and the virtues of everyday society. His representations are highly sententious, which is most seen in his overwhelming verse, which is full of classical ideology, and proverbial aphorisms. Marston establishes flawed, willful subjects in the court of Malevole/Altofronto, who need discipline. Like Marston's two *Antonio* plays: *Antonio's Revenge* and *Antonio and Mellida*, "the violence of denunciation and scorn neutralizes and overwhelms the fun of eccentricity and social foible...evil is shown as only an extension of a general abandonment of the world of Christian good sense, and the acceptance of folly as a way of life. The evil only flourish in these plays because there are so many fools to support them." (*The Malcontent*, Revels Edition, ed. By G.K Hunter, pg. liv-lv);

To right the wrongs of society can only happen through the Duke's use of disguise as a malcontent, a bitter speaker of truths. The mask of the malcontent is a highly theatrical device, something which Marston didn't create, but uses extremely efficiently. Shakespeare uses this in his romantic comedy, and somewhat in *Hamlet*. In *The Malcontent*, "we observe that others do not recognize them, but we have no doubt about the continuity of their characters; they are simply the same persons, found under transforming social circumstances. Marston, on the other hand, makes continuity a real question. The doubling of the personal voice in *The Malcontent* destabilizes any clear sense of the protagonist's nature" (*The Malcontent*, Revels student editions, ed. by G.K Hunter, pg. 9); and, "role-play itself is a major concern in Marston's art. It is a mechanism generally of the art of theatre (and of satiric poetry) and it functions here, as metaphor, as an element of the playwright's world-view (or views)" (*The Malcontent and other plays*, Oxford editions, ed. by Keith Sturgess, xv). The mask of Malevole, not unlike the mask of Marston as playwright and satirist, functions as a theatrical process of revelation both for the characters and the audience. For the characters it's about the plot, for the audience it's about the ideas they are supposed to grasp.

Ideally, it would be best to categorize *The Malcontent* as a bitter social comedy, with hints of tragicomedy, highly theatrical, but eager to establish realism in a world both contemporary and yet foreign enough to not invite claims of criticism against the state. It's a complicated play. "The frank confession of theatricalism is at the heart of the play's meaning. Marston was fond of asserting that he strove to delight rather than instruct; but

the choice of his particular comic form was for him clearly ethical, as well as aesthetic...The evident theatrical humour of plays like *The Malcontent* turns plot into a dramatic metaphor of absurdity" (*The Malcontent*, Regents Renaissance Drama edition, ed. by M.L Wine, pg. xvii) and, "the melodrama of the play and the ultimate triumph of the good: the tragic quest for enlightenment and self-mastery is not the question here, but rather the comic goal of society restored to sanity" (*The Malcontent*, Regents Renaissance Drama edition, ed. by M.L Wine, pg. xviii-xix). So we see desires to recreate society in an image of virtue, but the need for theatrical expression complicates that, and Marston's seeming desire to also play with the audience engagement with the theatrical, makes for strange, yet righteous results, "But absurdity does not demand vengeance: civilization asks for enlightenment and ultimately offers pardon" (*The Malcontent*, Regents Renaissance Drama edition, ed. by M.L Wine, pg. xxii).

Marston in any of his plays is hoping that there will be an audience to view and interpret. Again, he seems bent on a definite theatricality, both in the play and with the use of Induction, as a means of establishing a theatrical "sandbox" for the play to exist in: "the playwright's concern is seldom with realism but more usually with a theatricality that edges towards or into metatheatre...in true mannerist fashion, Marston sought to sharpen that consciousness further by a periodical intervention into the imaginative world of the play in which he breaks the frame of the fiction and thus inviting a sophisticated interaction between drama and audience" (*The Malcontent and other plays*, Oxford editions, ed. by Keith Sturgess, xiv).

Regardless of hopes of impact, Marston was a sound dramatist, as *The Malcontent* shows. Yet, his own desire as a playwright was eventually abandoned. When his plays were being published in a collected works, Marston went to court to keep his name off of it. It's obvious to see why, as Marston was now a priest with a congregation, but also, there may be some reasons other than that. Marston, in his plays, seems always to see futility in the world, the folly of the ages always overpowering men's more virtuous designs. It's possible he didn't believe in the theatre as a vehicle to try to write those follies. Or, he simply believed that it didn't matter. Let's never forget that Marston's tombstone says, *Oblivioni Sacrum* or "consecrated to forgetfulness." Thus lies a great satirist and playwright.