Introduction

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It is just four hundred years since Marston embarked on his brief and sensational career as a commercial dramatist for the boys' companies. His first play, *Histriomastix* (1598) was written, not for a boys' company at all, but for his peers at the Middle Temple,[1] but then, in two brief creative bursts, first for the playhouse at Paul's, then for the Blackfriars, he wrote eight sole-authored plays: for Paul's playhouse, between 1600 (possibly 1599)[2] and 1601, *Antonio and Mellida*, *Jack Drum's Entertainment*, *Antonio's Revenge*, and *What You Will*; for the Blackfriars, between 1604[3] and 1606, *The Malcontent*, *The Dutch Courtesan*, *The Fawn*, and *Sophonisba*. The silent two- or three-year interim marks Marston's virtual obliteration by Jonson in the 'War of the Theatres'.[4]

Marston's vigorous participation in a literary war was typical. From the start, it is clear that he intended to be noticed, and the means he instinctively used was aggression. His chosen nickname, 'Kinsayder', or 'castrator's song', is a kind of pun on his own name ('Mar-stone'), and the literary stones of others were his targets, initially in verse satire, and subsequently in drama.[5] His means of establishing himself in both genres was by attacking, with almost the first words he wrote, their most recognized practitioners; respectively, Joseph Hall and Ben Jonson. He was 'ready for trouble', and prepared to 'enter the literary lists . . . in the role of challenger'.[6] In the verse satires, he sustained a belligerent relationship not only with his chosen rival, but with his own readership, his fellow Inns of Court men, whom he dubs 'leud Priapians' in the very first lines of *Certaine Satyres* ('The Authour in prayse of his *precedent Poem*' (*Pigmalion*)).

Having provoked criticism, he then forestalled it. In his *Scourge of Villanie* preface, 'To those that seem iudiciall perusers', he concludes that 'Hee that thinks worse of my rimes then my selfe, I scorne him,

for he cannot, he that thinks better is a foole.' In the same volume's sixth satire, it is actually his own supporters who come off worst. Marston quotes a reader who thinks '*that's prety, prety good*', only to deride the praise of such an idiot: 'O indignitie / To my respectlesse free-bred poesie' (93, 99–100). His literary persona seems to have been backed up by truly obnoxious social behaviour,[7] and, to the end of his career, Marston was still challenging the censor and his own rivals. He and Jonson collaborated with Chapman on *Eastward Ho* in 1604/5, for which Marston's co-authors suffered imprisonment; the *Sophonisba* preface renews his attack on Jonson; and Marston went on to write a (lost) anti-James I play in 1608 for which he himself was imprisoned. Only then did he give up the fight, selling his Blackfriars share in 1608 and leaving William Barkstead to finish *The Insatiate Countess*.[8]

Marston's combativeness worked well, at least initially. In terms of attracting public notice, he was fortunate enough to be included in the bishops' ban on satires, and his works were among those burned publicly in 1599. In terms of thrusting himself into the canon, he gained almost instant recognition as one of the key 'pregnant wits' of both satire and stage, and was included in every list of prominent playwrights of the time.[9]

Thereafter, however, Marston's critical reception is largely a chronicle of neglect or hostility.[10] Robert Holub, reflecting on Jauss's theory of cultural 'horizons of expectation', postulates a process of 'continuous displacement', though 'hitherto unnoticed features' may also come to light.[11] Marston has been continuously displaced. Lacking the qualities which might correspond with the positives in successive ages' critical vocabularies – 'poetry' or nobility of characterization or moral loftiness or philosophical consistency – Marston has been condemned over the centuries, even by his rare apologists. Hazlitt, though generally quite appreciative, also finds Marston 'gross'.[12] The first-ever book-length study of Marston finds 'no modicum of nobility' in Marston, and dismisses him as 'next to nothing as a poet'.[13] Sometimes, as reception theorist Wolfgang Iser remarks, 'there are limits' to the negotiations of expectation between reader and writer, and, since one of Marston's essential qualities is his frustration of expectation, his work has provoked 'intensified negations'.[14] As recently as the 1970s, even those who lauded his Absurdist elements were still, just like their predecessors, trying – in vain – *also* to discern qualities of 'Moral Vision' in him, or to trace

his 'Quest for Moral Order',[15] and were therefore still reading against the text, in a vain high-modernist attempt to find in art the moral coherence that life denies. Since Marston actually sought out – or created – moral *dis*order and made it his medium, the 'Oblivion' that this relentless self-publicist insisted (once at the end of *The Scourge of Villanie*; again on his tomb) that he craved for has indeed been his fate.

In particular, his performance history is a virtual blank. Marston has thus been denied one of the most vital appeals of his work. Though he prepared his work for the press with great care, his primary focus was on producing 'scenes invented, merely to be *spoken*', as he reminded even his original readers (*The Malcontent*, 'To the Reader'). However, the relationship between critical reputation and stage performance, as Michael Scott's essay in this volume reminds us, is inextricable. The latter is fuelled by the former, and Marston stage revivals from the critical void have been few.

Fortunately, current critical perspectives show us that Marston is capable of coinciding exactly with our own 'horizons of expectation'. It is Marston's capacity to be read once again in terms of his contemporaneity which gives rise to the present volume of essays, drawn from Great Britain, Ireland, the United States, Canada, and Australia. The post-modern condition, where only 'the worst / Are full of passionate intensity', tends not to valorize moral rectitude, so freeing us to value Marston's plays for different or even antithetical reasons. There are encouraging signs already that Marston is being, in a very literal sense, re-read. Following a period when most editions of Marston were out of print, we now have Keith Sturgess's new edition of selections of his work in the Oxford World Classics series, and, until their lamentable change of mind, Penguin seemed set to produce a new original-spelling edition. There are new reprints of the excellent Revels editions of various individual plays. Equally important, however, is a re-reading of Marston in the sense of our applying more current critical technologies to his work. The essays in this volume, registering the co-ordinates, not of Moral Vision, but of market forces, play, gender, and politics, locate the essential quality and appeal of Marston's appeal as never before.

Possibly the most productive lines of enquiry that recent critical theory offers lead in exactly the opposite direction from moralism. Whether we address literature's commercial interchanges or the transactions of Bakhtinian 'Carnival' or Barthean *jouissance*, the

discourse of criticism is now highly attuned to play and inter-play between text and audiences. This kind of perception offers us most hope of coming to terms with the unpredictable shifting, reflexive quality that so marks Marston's work. Thus, while Jackson and Neill give full value to the 'combative' element in Marston, they also comment on an unexpected vein of self-mockery, specifically regarding the character of Lampatho Doria in *What You Will*, usually taken to be one of Marston's several hostile depictions of Jonson: 'Lampatho Doria is at one point dubbed with Marston's own satiric pseudonym, Kinsayder, [which] seems to convert the caricature into a teasing anamorphic double-portrait of the two rivals.'[16] Reavley Gair identifies four self-mocking references in Marston's plays to his own trademark red hair and little legs.[17] Such self-deprecation converts literary pugilism into game, but demonstrates, too, a particularly shrewd commercial instinct, wooing the same audiences he had deliberately antagonized in his satires by creating a playful, self-mocking, and self-referential bond with them.

The work of Agnew, Bruster, and others has examined the intimate relationship between theatre and the marketplace,[18] and Marston's plays seem more fully contextual than most, the sites of intersecting cultural and specifically market forces. His first theatre at Paul's was located – rather like a modern American movie-theatre in a suburban shopping mall – at the commercial hub of a fluid and upwardly mobile neighbourhood.[19] His plays traded on the prospect that these same boys who were today acting these very plays might 'come one day into the Court of Requests' (*Jack Drum's Entertainment* v.234), and, when the 'War' broke out, it was largely driven by rivalry for market share and specific market sectors.[20] Yet, while Marston was keenly aware of the commerce of theatre, his attitude to his own position is again ambiguous. The prefaces to his published plays contain the usual disclaimers, including the pretence of the socially conscious writer that the author was 'not implicated in putting the work into print'.[21] This could be read as an up-market promotional ploy, and Reavley Gair's and Rick Bowers's essays in this volume interpret Marston as a dramatist entirely attuned to market forces; yet – typically, in an author of such pronounced contradictions – Kiernan Ryan's essay identifies pronounced *anti*-capitalist markers in Marston's work, and David Pascoe detects a sense of self-contamination in Marston's commercialism. More broadly, Ryan and Pascoe both imply a relationship which was at

best ambivalent and at worst deeply hostile between Marston and his audience, a relationship which therefore closely mirrors the hostility of the verse satires. Yet other contributors emphasize the eagerness with which Marston accommodated himself to the marketplace, his stress on designing play and audience pleasure into his product, and even, as Janet Clare argues, his valuation of his audience as an ultimate and sympathetic court of appeal in the face of censorship. In all probability, both extremes are true and Marston's contrarieties remain unreconciled. His revulsion with his medium was matched by his fascination with it, and his contempt for his audience contends with his eagerness to succeed commercially.

Rick Bowers's essay, opening the volume, gives full value to Marston's sense of a buying public, as he argues that Marston's decentred world of play is part of a careful strategy of supply and demand. Ironically, though, Marston gives the audience what they want by denying them what they expect; seeking to 'unglue' (Marston's own neologism) dramatic and linguistic norms, and offering instead elements of carnival, farce, and parody, to produce, with the *Antonio* plays, what Bowers calls a 'revenge musical'. This was Marston's 'mart of woe', and he created an eager market for it. Reavley Gair's essay goes on to argue the extent and complexity of Marston's adaptations to the business of theatre. When Marston's market research, as it were, showed him a demographically different Paul's audience profile than the one he had anticipated – less exclusive and more popular – he adjusted his product accordingly; just as, not only at Paul's, but also in the Hall of the Middle Temple or at the Blackfriars theatre, he always adapted his theatre techniques and materials to supply what the specific space and audience demanded.

The ludic element that Bowers stresses in Marston is also seen in the verbal exuberance of Marston's early plays, their manic and apparently random deployment of dramatic device, their extravagant use of music, or their complete inversion of dramatic convention. Now that we approach a text with the *expectation* that its structures might be de-centred or that its 'meaning' will be a random 'galaxy of signifiers', the shifting surfaces of Marston's plays seem familiar territory. Even the exhausted debate of the 1970s as to whether the style of Marston's plays, and of the boy actors who played them, was 'parodic' can be revived in terms of 'pastiche',[22] identified by Fredric Jameson as a key marker of post-modernism's 'glossy' 'nostalgia art'.[23]

The present volume explores Marston's invocation of the play principle and his practice of it. Patrick Buckridge contends that, given the exigencies of censorship and repression in Marston's England, the author tried to elude political pitfalls by encouraging an alternative means of being read. In both his verse satires and in *Jack Drum's Entertainment* and other early plays, he stressed his own carnivalesque, metadramatic quality, urging a 'recreative surrender to the play impulse'. Matthew Steggle likewise stresses Marston's 'phantasticknesse', a quality he sees paralleled in Renaissance psychology and musical theory, which encourages a playful liberation of the text from serious design. Steggle identifies this theme in many of the para-texts to the plays, including, in the case of *What You Will*, the entire first scene, with its avowed invocation of the spirit of pleasure as the informing principle of his drama. It is a tendency which survives as late as the Prologue to *The Dutch Courtesan* with its anti-Horatian avowal that 'We strive not to instruct, but to delight', and Richard Scarr explores, in that play and in *The Insatiate Countess*, the most basic level at which audiences may have accepted that invitation. In Scarr's demonstration of lewd pun and *double entendre* in every corner of the Marstonian text, we can imagine a constant actor–audience interactivity, and almost of collaboration, in the slippery games of double meaning.

Sexuality is more than a local amusement in Marston's drama, however: it is probably the most insistent preoccupation of his work. Here, most clearly, the essentially duple nature of Marston's drama is apparent. He is as interested in gender as he is in sex; and if at times he seems particularly obsessed with what Mary Tew Douglas calls the 'fetishization of purity',[24] at other times it seems rather the 'fetishistic staging of the boy actor' which preoccupies him.[25] Both Peter Stallybrass and Bruce Smith[26] stress the 'indeterminacy' of stage gender, particularly in the liminal genre of tragi-comedy, Marston's special field. That indeterminacy found its apogee in the boys' companies. What we will so often find in Marston's plays is an intensely ambivalent attitude to women, which then converts into a far more radical ambivalence about gender roles and boundaries. Perhaps aware of the development of a female theatre audience,[27] Marston creates some of the most outspoken female voices in the literature of the period: Meletza in *What You Will*, Crispinella in *The Dutch Courtesan*, Dulcimel in *The Fawn*, or of course Sophonisba; yet Sophonisba also demonstrates Marston's tendency to martyr good

women;[28] and another group of women, from the minor figures of Mistress Brabant or Camelia in *Jack Drum's Entertainment*, or Celia in *What You Will*, through to Aurelia in *The Malcontent*, Franceschina in *The Dutch Courtesan*, and Isabella the 'Insatiate Countess', depicts women as men's betrayers.

Recent work on cross-dressing in the theatres has stressed the anxieties about the body underlying that convention,[29] and Marston's plays constantly dwell on the body – desired, fed, disguised, evacuated, voyeuristically observed, assaulted, touched, or self-touching. This is the site of the full gamut of male anxiety: of cuckoldry, of impotence, of rejection, and of female witchcraft (notably in the Erichtho scenes of *Sophonisba*); and, conversely, the inscriptions of male fantasy on the female body. Sometimes, all these contend in the same play. It is in *The Fawn*, a play containing sexual fantasy, impotence, and cuckoldry, that Hercules strikes the key-note of anxiety: 'If women should woo us to the act of love, we should all be utterly shamed: how often should they take us unprovided, when they are always ready' (IV.iv.131–2). It is therefore intriguing to see what Marston's drama contributes to the 'fashioning' of gender and to the role of gender in 'figuring social relations'.[30] One mechanism he records is a reflexive recoil from heterosexual and towards homo-social or auto-erotic pursuits.

This is William W. E. Slights's theme in his analysis of Marston's construction of a politics of gender, an analysis which concentrates on gender issues specifically through the male gaze. Working primarily from *The Fawn*, Slights carefully tracks Marston's delineation of the patterns of male sexual anxiety regarding possession, infidelity, and disease, which drive male sexual desires back in on homo-social alliances and the 'self', with women stimulating only onanistic fantasy. Sukanya Senapati also traces lost gender certainties. Indeed, she sees in Marston's handling of gender an unexpectedly radical interrogation of the dominant tropes of patriarchy. While many of the plays faithfully echo then-current ideologies, Marston opens to question the entire ethos of male dominance by his questioning of gender identity and preference (as the boy actors uniquely enabled him to do), by his ridicule of the male anxieties of economic and sexual competition, and by his foregrounding of strong, oppositional female voices.

Yet, Kiernan Ryan's analysis differs significantly here. He, too, detects male anxiety at the very heart of Marston's own preoccupa-

tions, but, rather than perceiving Marston's as a controlled and analytical voice, he sees Marston as the victim of the condition. Drawing on the recent ground-breaking work on hysteria – especially male hysteria – and representation, he sees the buried drives and distinctive obsessions of Marston – specifically in *The Malcontent* – as the very source of the power and uniqueness of Marston's imaginative logic and idiosyncratic style. However, this power is nihilistic, tearing down the forms of social, artistic, personal, and ultimately economic register. Similarly, David Pascoe's essay traces a vein of deep negativity permeating Marston's work. The starting point in his theme is the story of Mars, Venus, and Vulcan, retold in Florio's *Essayes of Montaigne*, a work that exerted so strong an influence on the later Marston, and specifically on *The Dutch Courtesan*. Pascoe parallels the act of translation with the translating sexual act, and traces ideas of adultery, adulteration, and sale from Virgil, through Montaigne and Florio; through Marston's own work as it projects these ideas on to the figure of Franceschina, the 'Dutch Courtesan'; arriving finally at Marston's own conscious acts of prostitution in a fluid marketplace.

Yet, other contributors see Marston as anything but self-indicting, and the next two essays, on the theme of Marston and politics, interpret him rather as targeting the political establishment of his own time with considerable self-confidence and daring. T. F. Wharton, while seeing Marston as being, indeed, preoccupied with sex, prostitution, and gender, argues that Marston uses these themes, in *The Malcontent*, specifically to target patriarchal discourses in Jacobean statecraft. Examining the play's parallel vocabularies of political power and sexual potency, and the paralleled three dukes who gain, lose, or re-gain power in the play, he concludes that these dukes are differentiated largely by the degree of skill with which they control the politics of sex, and that sex constitutes the entire and only field of political manipulation within the play. Marston's sceptical analysis here of the politics of sex is in keeping with the subversiveness which characterized him from the bishops' ban on his satires onward. Thanks to Jonathan Dollimore's work, the concept of Marston's 'radical' implications is already familiar to us. Dollimore's analysis of the *Antonio* plays argues that they illustrate Raymond Williams's theory of complex 'cultural moments', and that they covertly interrogate political ideologies from within. Indeed, Dollimore argues that Marston 'subverts providentialist ideology

and its corollary, natural law'.[31] The same may be said of many of Marston's other plays. The first play he wrote (*Histriomastix*) is his last politically conservative play. His plays of state impersonate the strategies of power only in order to expose them. This is no less true of *Sophonisba* than it is of *The Malcontent*. Peter Ure, over half a century ago, and Gustav Cross, nearly forty years ago, perceived that *Sophonisba* is a study in tyranny and compromise on the one hand, and resistance on the other.[32] *Eastward Ho* steps over into direct impersonation and ridicule of aspects of Jacobean power, and of course the authorities responded repressively. In truth, however, the censor is the unseen presence in all these plays, as they tread the delicate balance between covert question and overt challenge.

In this volume, Janet Clare's essay on censorship argues that Marston was much less prepared than most of his contemporaries meekly to accept regulatory restraint. In one of the contradictions that so characterize Marston's work, the 'free speech' issue demonstrates a simultaneous playfulness and utter seriousness. As mentioned above, Patrick Buckridge's essay in this volume shows the strategies of play by which Marston sought to escape official scrutiny. Clare's essay demonstrates the extent to which, nevertheless, Marston was prepared to push the limits. Examining cuts between various versions of the text, and tropes of free speech (a concept rare in the early modern period) within the plays, Clare shows that Marston made – notably in *The Malcontent*, *The Fawn*, and *The Dutch Courtesan* – extraordinary challenges to regal authority and the divine right of kings.

The volume concludes with an unapologetic demand that the theatrical establishment should have the courage to put Marston where he belongs: on the stage. Michael Scott views Marston's essentially impolite and inconvenient voice, hard to subsume within neutralizing theories, as the reason for his long history of critical neglect, which in turn has dictated his theatrical oblivion. Scott argues for an acceptance of Marston on his own anarchic terms, so as to enable us to appreciate a theatrical genius in action.

These, then, are the themes made evident to us by contemporary currents in literary theory and criticism and abundantly present in the plays of John Marston. One might claim not only that post-structuralist discourse *can* be applied to Marston, but rather that Marston's plays were *made* for it and have only been awaiting it. The essays in this volume demonstrate precisely this, revealing at every turn the sense of contemporaneity he is capable of evoking.

The terms in which he is admired are largely new to Marston criticism. This is not the snarling satirist, or the poet of lofty indignation, the moralist, the stoic, the tortured or bewildered cultural witness, or even the Absurdist – the versions of Marston visible at previous 'cultural horizons'. The essays in this volume reveal an unfamiliar Marston. Yet the Marston who emerges is immediately recognizable to us as our *Doppelgänger*. The same Marston who shocked his contemporaries and baffled whole centuries of critics is suddenly instantly accessible to us. De-centred and de-stabilizing, anarchically playful, constantly transgressing boundaries of literary convention, politics, or gender, Marston's vexing transactions with his audience always challenge us, not least by the jagged shifts of tone, characterization, and meaning which are not merely his protective colouration but his very essence. This is exactly the voice of post-modernism. Four centuries after the birth of Marston's brief and chequered career as a dramatist, we are once again equipped to discover affinities for the very aspects of his work which have provoked the most 'intensified negations' in even the most sympathetic readers of previous generations. We can see in him, now, possibly the most modern voice of the entire extraordinary Renaissance period of English drama.

NOTES

1 See Philip J. Finkelpearl, *John Marston of the Middle Temple* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 119–20.
2 For a 1599 date and *Antonio and Mellida*'s claim to be first, see W. Reavley Gair's Revels edition of that play (Manchester University Press, 1991), pp. 21–4; and, for 1600, and the claims of *Jack Drum's Entertainment*, Anthony Caputi, *John Marston, Satirist* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), pp. 259–60.
3 G. K. Hunter, in his Revels edition of *The Malcontent* (London: Methuen, 1975), chooses to 'disregard' the play's anti-James material, which frees him to contest the traditional dating of 1604, and argue an earlier date and an earlier company: see pp. xli–xlvi.
4 For a brief review of the more recent theories about the events of the 'War', in which various companies contended and in which various rival dramatists traded caricatures in their plays, see T. Cain (ed.), *Poetaster* (Manchester University Press, 1995), Introduction, pp. 30–6. The 'War' seems to have turned nasty, especially if we believe Jonson's brag (in the 'Drummond Conversations', Herford and Simpson, *Ben Jonson*, vol. I, p. 136) of having beaten Marston and taken his pistol from