

Poetomachia and The Early Jonson: The Aesthetics of Topical Satire

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As is well known, the latter years of Elizabeth's reign were characterized by uncertainty, not only over price inflation, shortages of corn, the unresolvable disputes with Spain and Ireland, but more importantly, the question of succession, the corresponding fear of civil war, and the rise of Essex and a younger generation of statesmen ambitious for power and recognition. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that Elizabeth had expanded enrollments at Cambridge and Oxford "to meet the urgent need for an educated Protestant ministry," and that by the 1590s these posts had all been filled, leaving a generation of graduates without employment, discontented and contentious (Riggs 55-56).

The cultural fruit of this discontent could be found throughout the decade in the vogue of satire derived from the classical satires of Juvenal, Martial, and Horace and practiced by Joseph Hall, Thomas Nashe, John Marston, John Donne, Ben Jonson, and others.¹ The Elizabethan satirists generally adapted the Roman practice of presenting a virtuous narrator who confronts the *adverarius* with "invective, sarcasm, irony, mockery, raillery, exaggeration, understatement . . . to make the object of attack abhorrent or ridiculous" as a means of moral instruction; typically, satires also included conventional justifications, in which the author would present himself as "a plain honest man, wishing harm to no upright person, but appalled at the evil he sees about him and forced by his conscience" to skewer those who are harming society (Preminger 738).

This was Jonson's standard *modus* in his comedies, but his satiric bent achieved a particularly personal and topical flavor in those early plays that make up his contribution to the war of the theatres, or poetomachia, that he fought against Marston and Dekker from 1599 to 1602. Jonson's contributions to the war include three epigrams, *Every Man*

Cope 2

Out of His Humour, *Cynthia's Revels*, and perhaps most pointedly, *Poetaster*. Marston

represented or attacked Jonson in three plays (*Histriomastix*, *Jack Drum's Entertainment*, and *What You Will*), while Thomas Dekker's *Satiromastix* served as the final blow, to which Jonson had already replied in *Poetaster*. The critical history of these plays presents two problems.

First is the social and personal aspect of this cultural war and how it interfaces with the plays: social conditions affecting the companies, how Jonson's commitment to his social and aesthetic agenda might have been taken by others, and what to make of Dekker's charge, *in a play*, damning Jonson for the killing of Gabriel Spencer. This problem is complicated in several ways: as the theatre involves public art and the need for profits, there is a preliminary concern that the artists manufactured their feud merely as a means to generate income. Associated with this are questions as to how the war began, the nature of the charges and how seriously we are to take them. One must also discern how these polemic agendas affect the works themselves, and what this may ultimately teach us about the use of poetry as a mouthpiece for one's political, artistic, or emotional agendas.

The second problem is the difficulty of separating these topical references from artistic achievement. As much ink has been spent in identifying the actual personages skewered in the plays as in following Jonson's artistic development—his developing dramatic theory, configurations of character, and experimentation with plot lines, characteristic motifs such as uses of the chorus, the use of song, and the dinner party or arraignment as resolution. This is perhaps due as much to the critical attention given his later

Cope 3

masterpieces—*Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*—as to the human tendency to put away artistic considerations when audiences may, as with onlookers observing a brawl, enjoy watching others deflate or beat each other. Finally, though these two questions—establishing the nature of the actual war in its topical references and

transcending those references to examine Jonson's artistry—may seem contradictory, that contradiction is central to the nature of satire itself, especially when characters are not well-disguised. I shall address both questions in this essay.

Origins of the War: Artistic Purpose or Publicity Stunt?

The origins and motives of the poetomachia are somewhat obscure. Boyce claims that "it is difficult to tell whether the rivalry was based on real animosity or was a publicity stunt" (697). It could also derive from Jonson's stated insistence of giving poetry a higher classical purpose than his contemporaries had accorded it, or in his ambition to transcend his bricklayer beginnings for the post of court poet, building himself up by disparaging others. Jonson himself indicates that during this period the theatres needed some kind of scandal to bring in badly needed money, though he ascribes these motives to Marston and Dekker, not claiming them as his own. In *Poetaster*, the actor Histrio tells Captain Tucca that the players have hired Demetrius, "a dresser [Decker=Dekker] of plaies about the towne" to "abuse Horace, and bring him in, in a play, with all his gallants" because "it will get us a huge deale of money . . . and we have need on't; for this winter has made us all poorer, then so many starv'd snakes" (3.4.22-4, 327-29). Dekker, on the other hand, accuses Jonson of bringing crowds of his supporters to disrupt those comedies mocking him; Horace in *Satiromastix* claims that "I can bring (and that they

Cope 4

quake at) a prepar'd troope of gallants, who for my sake shall distaste every unsalted line, in their fly-blowne Comedies" (1.2.142-44). Cook points out that the concerns over the actors' poverty were connected to the rivalry between the Children's companies, who played in private theatres, and the public companies of adult actors. Apparently the quarrel between the poets brought the audiences back and at least for a time eased that rivalry, for by 1602 an impressment order issued to round up the riff-raff at "plaie houses, Bowlinge Alleys, and Dycinge Houses" turned up "Gentlemen, and sarvingmen, . . .

Lawyers, Clarkes, country men that had law cawses, aye the Quens men, knightes, and as it was credibly reported one Earle" (Gawdy, quoted in Cook 129).

Jonson's descriptions of his motives follow the Roman formula of claiming to be a plain and honest man who can no longer hold his tongue at the abuses of poetry. After the second sounding for *Every Man Out of His Humour*, Asper swears he'll "strip the ragged follies of the time, naked" (17-18), especially damning "every servile imitating spirit" who "leaps forth a poet" (67-71). Despite this claim and the savagery of his ridicule for such poetasters, one should also note that from the beginning of his career right through to *Bartholomew Fair*, he was also expounding a theory of art derived from the classics, and as such, his indignation at the abuses of drama should be taken seriously. His first full play, *Every Man in His Humour*, opens with a prologue asserting that his work will present "an image of the times" with "deeds, and language, such as men do use" (21-23); the chorus of *EMO* gives this beginning a classical foundation when Cor-datus explains to Mitis that, in keeping with Cicero's definition, comedy should be an "imitatio veritae, speculum consuetudinis, imago veritatis"—the imitation and image of truth, the mirror of custom (206-07), which should be at once pleasant, ridiculous, and corrective.

Cope 5

This definition finds its fullest measure in the dedication to *Volpone*, where Jonson claims (perhaps somewhat disingenuously) that he has never been "particular" or "personal" in his works (53), later stating that he follows the doctrine that "the principal end of poesy" is "to inform men in the best reason of living" (100-01). Perhaps most revealing is the claim that he will "raise the despised head of Poetry again, and stripping her out of those rotten and base rags, wherewith the times have adulterated her form, restore her to her primitive habit, feature, and majesty, and render her worthy to be embraced and kissed of all the great and master-spirits of our world" (119-23). This last statement at once discloses the purity of his motives and single-mindedness of purpose

that are both his most endearing and abrasive traits--the humour, if one will, upon which his adversaries pounced once the attacks began.

This humour or philosophical assertiveness which explicitly attacked Jonson's contemporaries for abusing poetry, his claim that his work was not for commoners but for "learned ears" (*CR*, Prologue 7-11), and his attacks on courtiers as apes and sycophants gave Marston and Dekker the fodder to mock Jonson for pride, scorn, and arrogance. He was, as they say, "ripe for the picking," yet the seriousness of the quarrel, though given some basis in his own irascible humours, appears to be difficult to determine. The apparent animosities fueling the production of plays disappeared after 1602, and the combatants later composed together. Critics cite this as proof that the disagreements did not run deeply or that the others finally had to recognize that Jonson was truly the "English

Cope 6

Horace." He was in any case still defending himself in his dedication to *Volpone*, five years after the war's final shots were fired--a fact that implies that there was more to the poetomachia than a series of publicity stunts to draw in audiences.

Another item that complicates the "publicity theory" is the charge Dekker brought against Jonson for the murder of Gabriel Spencer: "art not famous enough yet . . . for killing a Player, that thou must eate men alive?" (*Satiromastix* 4.2.61-62). Given that Spencer was an acquaintance of all three poets, this charge could only come from a deep and unresolved anger at the senseless death of a co-worker; it could not be made lightly unless its author were both insensitive and morally bankrupt. I suggest, then, that the truce and later cooperation of these poets cannot prove that the poetomachia was not a serious dispute; it may simply indicate that all had suffered enough and that they should get on with their lives.

The Charges and Counter-charges

Having determined that at least some of the charges should be taken as serious disputation, it will be necessary to follow the course of the feud to observe how the

seriousness of Jonson's purpose and Marston's and Dekker's anger at his arrogance developed as polemic agendas; after this, conclusions regarding the distortion of artistic purpose for the sake of political and emotional agendas may be possible. Mary Leland Hunt, an unabashed advocate for Dekker, finds the beginnings of the feud in Jonson's satirical portrait of Anthony Munday in *The Case Is Altered*, claiming that he was "suffering from one of the most malignant attacks of egotism recorded in literature," misleading "critics down to the present century" (65-66). Riggs, on the other hand, quotes Drum-

Cope 7

mond to suggest that Marston's laudatory caricature of Jonson as Chrisogonous in *Histriomastix* led Jonson to mock his characteristic vocabulary by putting it in the mouth of Clove in *Every Man out of His Humour* (Riggs 72; *EMO* 3.4.21-40). According to Riggs, this was not merely a personal attack, but involved "the proper style of satire; Jonson was playing Horace to Marston's Lucilius," implying that classic "urbanity and simplicity" made for better work than "the coarse and bombastic diction associated with the 'harsh' satirists of antiquity" (Riggs 72-73). Further, *Histriomastix* was composed in the old allegorical mode, involving cycles of time in which

Peace makes plenty, plenty makes pride;
Pride brings quarrel, and quarrel brings war:
War brings spoil, and spoil poverty,
Poverty patience, and patience peace:
So peace brings war, and war brings peace.

(Puttenham, quoting Ihean de Mehune, in *Caputi* 83)

Set up in six acts, each of which illustrates one cycle of time, the play involves Chrisogonous, the Jonson figure, who is a kind of steadfast *raisonneur* as each of the three social classes endures its changes through the course of time. Such an approach to drama—wooden and mechanical at best—would undoubtedly have incensed Jonson, whose first four plays show not only comic and satiric content, but as noted, a continuous and

restless experimentation with new approaches to dramatic composition.

Jonson's complaint against his adversaries' lack of skill or understanding of the classical modes of composition could also be levelled against the last salvo of the war, Dekker's *Satiromastix*. In this play, Dekker harshly yoked an unfinished tragedy, the attempted rape of Celestine by King William Rufus, with the "untrussing" of Horace, who is repeatedly exposed to lively invective by Tucca, Crispinus and Demetrius, leading to

Cope 8

his final arraignment and humiliation before this same king. We experience the pathos of Walter Terill's need to keep his word and thus his "honor," sending his new wife to Rufus that this King might deflower her, Celestine's attempt to evade this "responsibility" by drinking what appears to be poison, Terill's accusation of tyranny against Rufus, Rufus's penitence and the awakening of Celestine, after which Crispinus asks the King to "wed a comicall event, to presupposed tragicke Argument" (5.2.113-14). The same king who has disgusted us with his immoral demands is suddenly the merry monarch who oversees the untrussing of a presumptuous poet, ending the play by sending the newlyweds off to bed. Unlike Jonson, whose contributions to the poetomachia—though sometimes uneven or labored, as in the overly long middle acts of *Cynthia's Revels*—show a steady progression of deliberate artistic experimentation, Marston's contributions were wooden and slight, while Dekker's violated the most basic principles of believability for the sake of his comic revenge. Jonson's claims were thus justified, but his characterizations of his opponents as inept and mindlessly bombastic in the case of Dekker-Briske or Marston-Clove of *EMO*, and proud, ignorant, and impudent in the cases of the Anaides-Dekker and Hedon-Marston of *Cynthia's Revels* were bound to inflame his opponents.

Besides mocking Marston's vocabulary in the character of Clove, Jonson also skewered Marston in three epigrams, taking "Playwright" to task for obscene language and bad manners (Epigramme XLIX), cowardice (LXVIII), and plagiarism (C), a point noted in *Satiromastix*, where Horace's epigrams anger Tucca to the point where he swears

"Sirra Poet, we'll have thee untrussed for this" (3.1.265-66). Marston's and Dekker's complaints against Jonson run the gamut from attacks on his "flat rebellion against the

Cope 9

Sacred lawes of divine Poesie" in his pride, scorn, arrogance, self-love, detraction and insolence (*Satiromastix* 5.2.214-15), to personal attacks on his background as a brick-layer and "foul-fisted Morter-treader" (1.2.138-39, 4.2.47); like Shakespeare, who patiently endured Greene's claim that he was "an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers" who "with his tyger's hart wrapt in a player's hyde, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you" (Greene, in Shakespeare 1835), Jonson was also reminded that he was neither a University Wit nor a man of title—class presumptions that seem unwittingly to confirm Jonson's estimate of Marston and Dekker as voluptuous courtier and impudent gallant. Further, Dekker's ridicule of Jonson's dress and appearance confirms yet another distinction between Jonson and his detractors. Their claims that he is a "Judas . . . that walkes in a Rug," a "thin-bearded Hermaphrodite" and a "goates pizzel" (1.2.283, 289, 293) are personal attacks, while his complaints against them generally "spare the persons, and . . . speake the vices" (*Poetaster*, To The Reader 85), a claim that they cannot make.

Dekker may be guilty as charged, but he is also particularly adept at turning Jonson's words and deeds against him, showing that he too has defects. For example, he mocks Ben as a poet for hurtful epigrams, acrostics that are merely clever (as acrostics generally are), for the palinode he'll "stitch to my revels" (a violation of style and tone), and for taking money for hack work, a charge to which Jonson was indeed liable. His epigram LXXIII, "To Fine Grand," itemizes the verses he has written and demands that Grand "pay me quickly, or Ile pay you" (22). Dekker also quotes the prologue to *Cynthia's Revels* to prove that Jonson is arrogant to "the vulger and adulterate braine" even as

Cope 10

he is obsequious to the learned (*Satiromastix* 2.2.57-59). Taking Jonson to task for his

wrangling against the "honourable and worshipfull Fathers of the law," Dekker accuses him of destroying the reputations of courtiers "because thy sputtering chappes yelp, that Arrogance, and Impudence, and Ignoraunce are the essentiall parts of a courtier" (*Satiromastix* 4.3.188-90), directly quoting Jonson's own claims in *Cynthia's Revels* and allowing him to indict himself (*CR* 2.2.79)

Thus, many of the charges on both sides could be substantiated. Jonson's complaints against Marston and Dekker for lack of artistry are borne out in both *Histriomastix* and *Satiromastix*; their personal attacks on him further illustrate the justice of his claim that he is "loath to have thy manners knowne in my chast booke; professe them in thine owne" (Epigram XLIX.5-6). Dekker's *Satiromastix*, on the other hand, accurately points out that Jonson is guilty of his own poetic sins—the writing of hurtful epigrams, the prostitution of his talent with hack work for hire, and the violation of style and tone in yoking a palinode to the resolution of *Cynthia's Revels*. Further, Jonson's aggressive defense of his classical vision, his obsequiousness to the universities and the Queen while simultaneously denouncing courtiers as a class might accurately be described as proud, scornful, and arrogant. Finally, though the charge of murdering Gabriel Spencer could be seen as out of place even in satire, its presence in *Satiromastix* is a truth that Jonson would have to live down and an indicator of the seriousness of the "game" these writers were playing.

Finally, there is the question of whether this topical debate has distorted the plays themselves; of the salvos fired in the "war," only *Satiromastix* shows the violent yoking

Cope 11

of incompatible plots and thus stands as a clear example of artistic failure brought on by personal revenge. By its nature, topical satire incorporates specific references that strip the disguise from the character's humours, risking destroying art for the sake of one's aesthetic, emotional or political agendas. Certainly none of the plays of this period measure up to Jonson's later comedies, to Marston's *The Malcontent* or to Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, yet each has its moments of high poetry and comic invective, and in

Jonson's case one may observe the ceaseless experimentation with form—particularly his experimentation with a variety of plot lines, choric commentary and song, and the arraignment as a device for resolution. The third play in this series, *Cynthia's Revels*, is perhaps his boldest experiment, fusing native allegory with classical mythology while bringing the humour characters to comic arraignment in the form of a masque. This play, though muddied by its peculiar excesses, explores the mode of fantasy and spectacle that would become the central motif of his work as the author of the court masques.

Transcending The Topical: Plot in Jonson's First Major Plays

In *Ben Jonson: A Literary Life*, J. David Kay is quick to assert that Jonson did not begin his career as an "experimental" dramatist at odds with the theatre for which he wrote," but rather was "content to imitate established comic sub-genres, sharpening normative judgements and satiric detail while downplaying romantic sentiment" (22). This claim is fair if by "experimental" we mean the twentieth century notion of innovation by destroying or remaking conventions and if we recognize that from the beginning Jonson's modus was ironic rather than celebratory. If, on the other hand, we understand that Jonson spent his first years establishing a repertoire by a deliberate experimentation with a

Cope 12

limited number of recognizable motifs, we may come to a fuller appreciation for his particular mode of genius. *Every Man in His Humour* begins this process, establishing Jonson's preference for the city comedy format—what came to be known as "Jonsonian realism"—over the Shakespearean pattern of contrasting the corrupt polis with the green wood, where inhibitions are released and transformations may occur.

Further, he is from the start far less interested in love as a power by which "the *senex iratus* gives way to a young man's desires" leading to a *cognitio* which "causes a new society to crystallize around the hero" (Frye 180, 163). In Jonson, love is usually the means by which to expose the humours and weaknesses of gulls, though *EMI* nominally projects its triumph in young Knowell's marriage to Bridget. Even in this play, however,

transformative love is not the focus of the action, as it is in all of Shakespeare's festive comedies. In *EMI*, married love is shown as hollow in the cases of Kitley and Cob, who must be brought to repentance after the exposure of their humours. Also, though Bridget is the object of Edward's love, she is present in the plot more to expose the idiocy of Matthew and as the means by which to frustrate old Knowell and finally draw him together with Clement on the basis of Edward's skill as her poet. Social order is restored, as in all comedy, but Jonson's brand of comic humor begins as ironic exposure and eventually progresses to outright satire. He may initially be following "New Comedy elements, modified in accordance with Elizabethan tastes," as Kay would have it (22), but his path is from the beginning markedly different from that of his great predecessor.

More importantly, *EMI* establishes the foundation for his deliberate experimentation. Jonson worked with five basic plot patterns, variations of which he worked

Cope 13

throughout his career. These are the collision of two or more groups of gulls for the sake of comic explosion, as in *Every Man Out of His Humour* or *Bartholomew Fair*; the pump motif of *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, in which villains aided by clever servants usher gulls into their domains one by one, fleecing and expelling them; the villains' plot against virtuous young men, as in *Poetaster* and in *Epicoene*, where Morose's plot against Dauphine is ultimately foiled; the romantic plot involving the young man and woman in conflict with the senex, usually developed ironically, as in *EMI*, *Poetaster*, and *Bartholomew Fair*; and a series of variations on the young man's ritual journey, as in the cases of young Knowell's journey to town, the nominal journey to the fountain in *Cynthia's Revels*, and Sir Politic's journey to Italy in *Volpone*. These plot formulas are sometimes found in combination, as in the double plot of *Volpone* or in the ironic romantic resolution of *Bartholomew Fair*, which grows out of the collision of gulls.

Jonson also developed a family of character types who appear in various combinations within these plots, experimenting as well with choral commentary and the ar-

raignment as resolution. His use of choral commentary in the double chorus of *Every Man Out of His Humour* is particularly notable. First, he establishes Cordatus as literary critic and aesthetic theorist who, with Mitis, foresees the author's intentions. A second chorus is established in Macilente's and Buffone's asides, which present an early model of the savage asides employed by Arruntius and the other Germanicans of *Sejanus*. Jonson also employs a variety of comic arraignments to bring his plays to resolution: the dinner party of *EMI*, the use of deception in the mode of the clever slave to awaken characters deceived by their humours in *EMO*, and the scenes of legal or royal courts which figure

Cope 14

in *EMI*, *Poetaster*, and *Volpone*. As noted, the masque is the means of exposure and resolution in *Cynthia's Revels*, a device used principally in revenge tragedies or tragicomedies such as *The Spanish Tragedy* or *Hamlet* and Marston's *The Malcontent* for ritual revenge or psychological exposure, but here employed for a far different effect.

Perhaps most important for the sake of this essay, however, is to establish the fact that Jonson's pattern of deliberate experimentation was continuous and undisturbed throughout the period of the war of the theatres. As noted, *EMI* establishes his preference for realism in the city comedy mode. The play develops in the Roman mode of conflict between the senex and his son, and involves the son's (and later the father's) journey to town, where friends and gulls assemble, old and young. *EMI* features the first of Jonson's *miles gloriosus* characters, Bobadil, as well as the first of a great chorus of clever slaves, Brainworm. There are the usual louts (Matthew, Stephen), a pair of jealous husbands from different social classes, and a Theophrastian angry man, Downright. All are drawn into a vortex in which their humours are given full reign before being drawn to Clement's house for arraignment, exposure and repentance, or, in the case of young Knowell, acceptance in the structure of authority which, notably, involves the cultural authority of poetry, a motif which will surface more forcefully in the commentary of *EMO*, *Cynthia's Revels*, and in *Poetaster* as the defining paradigm of authority in Augustus's court.

Jonson's next play, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, begins by announcing that he will not repeat himself. This play is to be no ordinary city comedy, but is a "comical satyre" which does not simply present "an image of the times" (*EMI*, Prologue 23), but instead will "strip the ragged follies of the time, naked" (After the second sounding 17-
Cope 15

18). The tone has changed from bemused pleasure to savage irony, which is developed through the double choric commentary described earlier, and through a series of intensely hyperbolic characters. Among these are the chronically envious Macilente, the ridiculous *miles gloriosus* Puntarvolo, the cloyingly uxorious Deliro, his grasping, faithless wife, Fallace, and Saviolina, the shallow and haughty woman who presides over this society of pathetic overreachers whose idea of success is to be able to strut in expensive clothes—a motif which appears later in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The plot turns on the journey of the foolish gallants—the asinine Puntarvolo, the vain and insipid Fastidius Briske (thought by some to represent Marston), and the rest of the ambitious bumpkins in pursuit of an unworthy goal—to become courtlings in a heartless social milieu.

Love as a corrupting influence resurfaces in this play, but here the exposure does not involve the groundless jealousy of husbands, instead presenting the deluded husband who must be awakened to his wife's inconstancy. The play also features an unusual comic arraignment: Macilente, who had been blinded by envy of almost everyone's station in life, awakens to discover the falseness of courtiers who show "grace, as they pretend comes from the heart" (4.4.82) while in truth exuding only shallowness and foppish ambition. Through a series of deceptions in the manner of the clever slave, Macilente is able to deliver more innocent characters from their humours while at the same time arraiging Deliro's wife, Fallace, and the careless fop, Briske. This is the first play that clearly figures in the poetomachia, and it should be noted that the plainly visible references to Marston are found only in one scene (3.4), where Clove, a minor gull, speaks a fustian English that mimics the pompous speeches in one of Marston's plays.

The resemblance of *Briske* to Marston, often noted by critics, is too general to be taken as a clear thrust at Jonson's nemesis. The play's faults—its length and corresponding lack of movement—show the young playwright struggling with the large canvas of the comic plot, but do not grow from artistic distortions wrought for the sake of his dispute with Marston.

The same faults mar *Cynthia's Revels*, which nevertheless remains Jonson's boldest experiment, his only play—other than his later court masques, of which this is a preliminary model—which departs from city realism. The play mixes classical myth, court intrigue, and the native allegorical tradition of the moralities, but most importantly, features the masque as the point to which the plot leads, its device for comic arraignment and the exposure of the unworthy characters. The plot develops around the motif of the fountain of Narcissus as the source for the inflation of humours in the characters who must be corrected; as in *EMO*, these are fops, courtlings, and the heartless hinds of the court, but in this play there is also a layer of virtuous court personages headed up by Arete and Cynthia herself. As noted by Riggs, "the play flaunts Jonson's ambitions at every turn" (70), but Riggs fails to see that there is no "contradiction between Criticus's reformist stance and his desire to be employed as a court entertainer" (71). While fops and courtlings could be characterized as "sybaritic and conceited" (Riggs 71), the point of the play is that Criticus must find his way through these false courtiers to the Queen and her inner circle, whom he characterizes as virtuous: there is good reason for Criticus to find his place in court, where the true wielders of power remain undeluded by foppery.

Despite this caveat, however, *Cynthia's Revels* appears to be the play most singularly marred, both in the "motley web" of its story types (HS 398) and by Jonson's political ambitions and agenda of revenge against Marston and Dekker. Its political ambitions are apparent in the symbolic representation of Elizabeth as Cynthia, a point

which unnecessarily constrained Jonson in representing her as a character. James Savage notes that "Elizabeth the Queen has been of far more importance to Jonson the aspirant than . . . Cynthia the comic character to Jonson the poet" (25): she cannot live and breathe as a character with a personality, but is merely present as a deity whose whole purpose is to deliver the resolution through her decree. Further, the array of court characters, including those thought to represent Marston and Dekker (Hedon and Anaides), is little more than a "collection of personified faults corresponding to the evil powers of the Morality play" (HS 404-05): the agenda transforms the players through schematic representation in which Virtue is contrasted to Vice without ever penetrating to the emotions that move the heart or the kinds of situational ironies and corrections that convince us emotionally.

Jonson's fourth major play, *Poetaster*, constitutes his most direct assault in the war of the theatres. The play follows a similar pattern to *Cynthia's Revels*, though here the plot against the virtuous young poets involves false poets rather than false courtiers. As a Roman comedy prefiguring the Roman tragedy *Sejanus*, the play is unique among the Roman plays of the period in that its context is not one of political power, but cultural authority. As with *Sejanus*, Jonson follows his sources fairly closely; "the portrayal of the Augustan literary milieu" is derived from Horace's epistle to Augustus (*Epistles* 2.1;

Cope 18

Riggs 76). The play features a return to the conflict between senex and son in the romantic plot of Ovid and Julia, which is connected to the plot of Crispinus and Demetrius (Marston and Dekker) against Horace. As in *Cynthia's Revels*, the plots of the villains are employed to establish the superiority of the hero, but unlike that play, the groups of true and false courtiers and poets are brought together long before the arraignment. First at a party and later at a court banquet, these groups mingle to establish conflicts that give the plot far more movement than either *EMO* or *Cynthia's Revels*.

Further, though this is the most blatantly topical of the four plays, its characters

are given more emotional depth than in its immediate predecessor. Crispinus, for example, is treated roughly by Horace in their initial meeting; he *is* a "strong tedious talker" full of "lewd solecisms, and worded trash" (3.1.201, 106), but Horace's treatment of him also gives him a true motive for joining those interested in his downfall. The use of invective by both Horace and Tucca also adds humor and color to the language of the play, as does the extensive use of songs, inept lyrics utilized for comic relief and to highlight the vanity and ambitions of the false poets. Finally, Savage notes that in the comic resolution, Augustus is a far more satisfactory deity than Cynthia in the earlier play, "for Jonson did not find it necessary in him to placate an irascible old queen" (25). After determining the guilt of the false poets, Augustus relaxes, leaving the comic revenge to Horace—who gives them purgatives which make them vomit up their false words. This resolution is probably too vulgar for some tastes, but it makes for a grotesquely dramatic passage on stage. Virgil, as the supreme cultural authority in the play, delivers the final

Cope 19

sentence, assigning the poetasters to read the classics "and hence-forth, learne to beare your selfe more humbly" (5.3.562-63)

Conclusion

The war of the theatres fought by Jonson against Marston and Dekker presents a major obstacle in assessing Jonson's early career, but it also affords critics an opportunity to explore the extent to which such topical agendas may contribute to or destroy the artistry of the plays. One may approach the poetomachia—and Jonson's contribution to it—by two major avenues, each of which presents a distinctive reading. The first involves determining the social function of this war, both through appeals to social conditions, literary fashion, the seriousness of Jonson's commitment to his aesthetic and social agenda and of Dekker's reference to the killing of Gabriel Spencer, which cannot be taken as a jest for publicity's sake. Connected to this is the problem of penetrating the allegory of character developed in all the plays associated with the poetomachia. I have only ad-

dressed this concern incidentally in this paper, as it seems that most of the identities of major characters have been adequately established, and as long as one is wary of the kinds of overdetermination practiced by Small and other nineteenth century critics, there is currently no need to expend energy on the question of "who's who." The major initial concern, then, is determining whether the poetomachia was a publicity stunt or a serious quarrel, and unlike most modern critics, I cannot dismiss either the reference to Spencer or the seriousness of Jonson's agenda. The fact that these poets later worked together does not prove that the quarrel was sincere, the emotions real; it simply indicates that perhaps all had suffered enough and were willing to "bury the hatchet."

Cope 20

The second way of reading the plays associated with the war is through noting how and when artistic purpose is distorted by the polemic agenda. Dekker's *Satiromastix* is the most obvious case of such distortion, and I have suggested that Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels* suffers from a formal dichotomy of good versus evil characters derived from the moralities but determined by his ambition to raise himself while exposing Marston, Dekker, and courtlings generally. Beyond this case, the aesthetic sins of Jonson's early plays are not derived from his agenda in the poetomachia, but display in both *EMO* and *Cynthia's Revels* an incomplete mastery over plot movement. Jonson's development in the first four major plays is more clearly seen as a testament to his deliberate practice of experimentation with plot and its various motifs. Finally, topical content expressed as fierce satire need not destroy the artistry of the play; attentiveness to the development and motivations of character, plot movement, and onstage dramatic variation are necessary for artistic success regardless of whether the play tickles or stabs.

Cope 21

End Notes

¹Early intimations of this vogue may be seen in the Marprelate prose satires against Archbishop Whitgift's demand for liturgical uniformity (Drabble 624), and in Gabriel Harvey's

1592 attack on Robert Greene as "the Ape of Euphues" or "Patriarch of shifters" (Drabble 415). Thomas Nashe would savage both the Martinists and Harvey in his early satires, *Pierce Penniless his Supplication to the Divell* and *Straunge News, of the Intercepting of certaine Letters*, later giving Jonson his initiation as a satirist in their collaboration on *The Isle of Dogs*, a play which brought the charge of sedition against Nashe and earned Jonson some time in jail. Joseph Hall was probably one of the authors of the Cambridge *Parnassus Plays*, satirizing the dilemmas of young men trying to find their way in London.

Fed up with satires that they perceived as seditious, Archbishop Whitgift and Richard Bancroft, Bishop of London, condemned Hall's *Virgidemiarum, Sex Libri* and satires by Nashe, Marston, and others on June 1, 1599, further decreeing that "no satires or epigrams be printed hereafter" (Riggs 56). The order did not end the vogue of satires. The identification of Jonson's *EMO* as a "comicall satyre" displays one of the many end runs around the decree, and Riggs supposes that Cordatus's commentary in that play and the multiple allusions to classics in *Cynthia's Revels* "disarm potential accusers by showing that he had not exceeded the license granted to classical authors" and reminding censors "that this is art, and high art at that, rather than life" (Riggs 58, 59).

Cope 22

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Cope 23

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