

Puzzling Marston and Homer (A Response to Brownell Salomon and William W. E. Slights)*

JOSEPH A. PORTER

William W. E. Slights, "Fairy-tales, Form, and the Future of Marston Studies," responds helpfully to some disconcerting features of Brownell Salomon's earlier essay, "The 'Doubleness' of *The Malcontent* and Fairy-tale Form," including the latter's purported revelations about how Propp's fairy tale format fits not only *The Odyssey* but also *The Malcontent*, and so provides the key to the "doubleness" T. S. Eliot found in the play. Slights throws useful cold water on some of Salomon's argumentative recklessness, and on his partiality for the idea of doubleness. "Why," Slights asks, "must critics always be on the look-out for 'doubleness,' contrasting pairs, dichotomies?" (304). They—specifically Salomon—needn't and shouldn't, is Slights's answer to his own rhetorical question.

But why does Salomon do it? Only to validate Eliot's remark after all these years?¹ While such a desire may figure among Salomon's motives and rationales, his essay shows lineaments of a more interesting reason for privileging doubleness.

As an example of "double-layered meaningfulness" in the play's action Salomon cites V.iv.84 s.d., "*Starts up*":

Malevole's sudden springing to life . . . several uncertain minutes after Mendoza had apparently poisoned him in cold blood before the audience's eyes . . . is a *coup de théâtre* that produces not only an abrupt comic surprise but also a chilling reminder that Mendoza's amoral viciousness might well have been fatal. (154)

*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.

Here Salomon seems at best only half right. Malevole's starting up may certainly produce a surprise in performance, and possibly with a comic effect.² Even this claim, though, suffers from the reductive essentializing Slights notes elsewhere in Salomon's argument. For while "comic" goes some way toward characterizing the effect, at least in some performances, the rubric only begins to do justice to the moment, which might easily produce uncomic effects of uncanniness and nightmarishness. As for Salomon's claim that Malevole's starting up produces a "reminder" that his apparent death by poisoning might have been as real as it has seemed until his action, to me this claim is wrong and hardly comprehensible.

Badly as the notion of doubleness serves Salomon here and elsewhere, the category of doubleness does nevertheless fit this moment of the play, and others, precisely and usefully—and in ways that Salomon adumbrates on occasion despite his schematic rigidity, and that Slights, for all his suppleness, ignores.

As Slights remarks, it seems wrong to insist on contrastive pairs in accounts of character or literary genre. As he must also know, there are more legitimate contrastive pairs, such as the one on which the *coup de théâtre* in question depends, i.e., dead versus alive. Mendoza, satisfied that he has poisoned Malevole, rendering him "dead on a sudden" (V.iii.43), advises Celso to arrange the masque of the psychopomp Mercury leading the "dead" dukes' souls—Mercury whose caduceus "of life and death . . . hath the sole command"³—and then at Mendoza's exit the seemingly dead Malevole "*starts up and speaks*" (75 s.d.). Thus one need hardly be "on the look-out for 'doubleness'" to notice that this moment is about the death-life contrastive pair and their mutual exclusiveness.

However a different contrastive pair, one perhaps even more absolute and mutually exclusive, figures in the moment. It figures pervasively and at times consciously in Marston's textual carpet, and Salomon takes some of its measure.

Mendoza's stage direction at the beginning of the episode reads, "*Seems to poison MALEVOLE*" (35 s.d.). *Seems?* Apparently the stage direction means that, to the audience, Mendoza appears to poison Malevole. That is, for performance of the immediate local action, the stage direction "*poisons MALEVOLE*" would serve as a nearly exact equivalent. Marston's

stage direction does not, that is, mean anything like “seems to poison but clearly does not,” for if it did there would be no *coup de théâtre* forty lines later.

For a reader, on the other hand, the stage direction eliminates the possibility of any surprise about Malevole’s continuing to live: “seems to poison” entails “does not actually poison.” Thus during the forty lines in question, while some in a theater audience suppose Malevole dead, the reading audience knows him to be alive. In a sense, then, the life-death opposition here flushes out a second contrastive pair, the opposition of stage and page, or of speech and writing,

This particular drama-specific doubleness seems to be of peculiar concern and moment in *The Malcontent*. Marston acknowledges as much in the introductory letter “To the Reader,” as Salomon notes (155). In other, less explicit ways, too, Marston’s concern with this particular doubleness endemic to drama shows in the play. At the passage under consideration, for instance, we have Mendoza’s commanding Celso to script a show involving Mercury, patron both of eloquence and of writing, as well as mention of death’s tonguelessness and Malevole’s plain tongue. Finally, when the action returns to the realm of legible, inaudible speech headings and stage directions, readers may be struck by the second clause of “MALEVOLE. (*starts up and speaks*)” (75). Since “speaks” goes without saying in speech headings, the utterly redundant word invites attention here, and it may exhibit a flicker of Marston’s responsiveness to the pressure of drama’s distinctive duality.⁴

Salomon’s essay exhibits some rather similar responses to the problematic fact of the play’s existence in the paired and mutually exclusive realms of script and performance. In his passing suggestion that the play’s “‘correct’ tonal balance is left to the performers to determine” (157) we may glimpse a line of inquiry for future Marston study, into such matters as how distinctively Marstonian this particular instance of the doubleness of drama might be, and whether it privileges or traduces either of the paired realms.⁵

As to Salomon’s “*pièce de résistance*” (Slights 303), the roping of Homer, along with Propp, into his discussion of *The Malcontent*, Slights’s doubts about its value seem well-taken. Indeed Salomon veers so sharply and unexpectedly from Marston to Homer that further questions about his

rationale arise. Possibly some resonance of the continuing lively debate about whether the Homeric poems' origin is oral or scribal has contributed to Salomon's classical excursus.⁶

Duke University
Durham, North Carolina

NOTES

¹For Eliot's 1934 remark about Marston's doubleness, and the conversation it has spawned, see Salomon 151. See also MacDonald P. Jackson and Michael Neill, eds., "Introduction: Select Bibliography," *The Selected Plays of John Marston* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), for a survey of critical takes on Marston's "deliberate Mannerist disjunctiveness" (xxi). Could Salomon's marshalling of Marston, Homer, and Propp actually be a move in a shadow campaign to rehabilitate Old Possum?

²John Webster, probable author of the Induction and five other additions, one of which immediately precedes Malevole's springing up, seems to imitate the moment at V.vi.149 (148?) s.d. in *The White Devil*, ed. John Russell Brown (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1960). Webster's additions to *The Malcontent* would be more than "somewhat disruptive" (Slight's 307) were they "editions," as Slight's text has them (307).

³*Certain Satyres V.34, The Poems of John Marston*, ed. Arnold Davenport (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1961) 88.

⁴The verbal doubleness of writing and speech and the dramatic doubleness of page and stage figure widely, even pervasively, in critical discourse of recent decades including, in English Renaissance study, such Derridean works as Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990), the "performance-centered" discourse that Harry Berger, *Imaginary Audition: Shakespeare on Stage and Page* (Berkeley: U California P, 1989), terms "the new historicism," and the articles and responses by Paul Budra, Paul Yachnin, and Mark Thornton Burnett about *Doctor Faustus* in *Connotations* 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3.

⁵Paul Budra, "Doctor Faustus: The Play-Text or the Play?: (A Reply to Mark Thornton Burnett)," *Connotations* 1.3 (1991) 286-89, bridles engagingly against "The contemporary critical tendency . . . to see texts everywhere, to see nothing but texts" (287), and he scores several valid points. Yet he fails to carry the day with such a bald assertion as "That drama was not thought of as text in this period needs little proof" (287). Marston in *The Malcontent* is not the only playwright of the period who (at least at some moments) shows evidence of thinking of drama as text.

⁶The issue of the oral or scribal origin arises notably in the works of Martin Bernal—*Black Athena* 2 vols. to date (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1987, 1992) and *Cadmean Letters: The Transmission of the Alphabet to the Aegean and Further West Before 1400 B.C.* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990)—and in the controversy that has accompanied them. See also Hugh Lloyd-Jones, "Becoming Homer," *New York Review of Books* 39.5 (March 5, 1992).