



**UNIVERSIDAD  
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CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL



**FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA**

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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

# The Early Debate on Poetry and the Poet

Jonson's Humanism and Marston's Cynicism during the  
Poetomachia

Alumna: Patricia Bedmar Martín-Merino

Tutor: Antonio López Santos

Salamanca, 2020



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## **Resumen**

Este TFG tiene como objetivo analizar las dos corrientes filosóficas durante la Poetomaquia que contribuyeron en parte a crear dos concepciones distintas de la función del poeta y de la poesía. Ben Jonson es representante del Humanismo y por tanto, aboga por la capacidad del poeta de discernir la verdad mediante su arte y el didactismo del mismo. John Marston en cambio cuestiona la divinidad del poeta y niega la posibilidad de la poesía como herramienta didáctica. Considerando estas dos posiciones, estos autores contribuyen de forma temprana al debate sobre la función del poeta y la poesía.

## **Abstract**

This TFG aims to analyse the two philosophical attitudes during the Poetomachia that partly contributed to the creation of two different understandings of the function of the poet and poetry. Ben Jonson supports Humanism and therefore, he advocates the ability of the poet to discern truth through his art and its didacticism. John Marston instead questions the poet's divinity and denies the possibility of poetry being a didactic tool. Considering these two positions, these writers make an early contribution to the debate of the function of the poet and poetry.

## **Palabras clave**

Poetomaquia, Ben Jonson, John Marston, teatro isabelino, Guerra de Teatros, Guerra de Poetas, Humanismo, Cinismo, drama del Renacimiento.

## **Key words**

Poetomachia, Ben Jonson, John Marston, Elizabethan theatre, War of the Theatres, Poets' War, Humanism, Cynicism, Renaissance Drama.

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## The Early Debate on Poetry and the Poet: Jonson's Humanism and Marston's Cynicism during the Poetomachia

### I. Introduction

In the midst of the golden age of theatre in England a great controversy starts to unveil. Dramatist John Marston writes *Histrionomastix* in 1599 and he decides to include a character modelled after the renowned Ben Jonson. He calls him Chrisogonus, and he represents the poet-philosopher, a “smug, dramatist associated with the public theatre.” (Bednarz, “Representing Jonson” 6) The aforementioned poet quickly responds in *Every Man out of his Humour* with a monologue that alludes to Marston's style. However, James P. Bednarz questions the order of these events and proposes a different timeline in which Jonson's *Every Man out of His Humour* would precede by a few months the stage representation of *Histrionomastix*. After these two plays, Marston writes *Jack's Drum Entertainment*, in which Jonson can be found again in the character of Brabant Senior. Jonson positions himself in 1600 against both John Marston and Thomas Dekker, who is now part of this war. Hedon and Anaides are caricatures of them in Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels*, which is swiftly followed by Marston's *What You Will* in 1601 with another attack on Jonson. Jonson condenses all his critiques in *Poetaster*, an epitome of the two types of poets and Dekker delivers the last blow in *Satiromastix*. This succession of events has been seen from many angles and heavily discussed at the time. Some consider the War of Theatres a series of personal attacks rooted in Jonson's fear of a new competitor. His position as a respected poet was put into question by a younger writer and therefore, these attacks would be nothing more than two men quarrelling for social prestige. Other scholars instead emphasise the economic impact of the Poetomachia. Maybe these two writers fighting each other was a source of amusement for audiences at the time, which generated more revenue. However, it seems that they did not benefited from it as explained by Gieskes and confirmed by payments made by Philip Henslowe, and it was instead an argument on patronage if the economic aspects of the conflict are analysed. And thus, a question arises: what was then the real conflict between these writers? In order to answer this query, the Poetomachia should not be considered an isolated literary war but a result of a societal change and the very perception of art itself. The Elizabethan period marks a transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in England. There is a great influx of foreign poetry, especially from Italy, which shapes the literary ideals of the time. Poetry in England starts to question its own nature due to new Italian forms and the adjacent philosophy of Humanism. The Poetomachia is then “a kind of crystallization of such a struggle, offers access to the fraught beginnings of the transition from a market dominated by patronage and external legitimating authorities towards an internally coherent and self-legitimizing field of cultural production.” (Gieskes 81) The War of Theatres is a conflict that encompasses the function of the poet and literary production, far beyond from dramatists calling each other pedants and incompetents. And thus, these back-and-forth accusations between these two wildly different poets are the catalyst of a literary war that not only shaped Elizabethan theatre but also marked an early

division on the nature of literature. As Enck advocates: “in a century inured to mass ideologic combats a literary war becomes the death struggle between two cultures: a popular one supporting the public theater and a snobbish one patronizing the private.” (387) While Ben Jonson champions an elevated poetry, designed to spread Humanistic ideals, John Marston and Thomas Dekker instead favour a more Cynical approach and heavily criticise their colleague. Therefore, I will argue that these two opposite philosophical understandings of theatre embodied by Ben Jonson’s Humanism and John Marston’s Cynicism shape the conception of literature at the time and precede a literary division between a more intellectual, lofty poetry and a popular one.

## II. Ben Jonson: the Humanist poet

Ben Jonson was already an established dramatist in 1599. He is mentioned in Philip Henslowe’s diary for the first time in 1597, who helped him economically alongside Edward Alleyn due to theatres being closed as a result of the scandalous *Isle of Dogs* (1597). He was a respected poet with successful plays and one of the main literary referents in Elizabethan England. Of course, his fame did not only bring compliments and admiration, but also heavy criticism. John Weever dedicated him more than a few harsh words in his epigrams, since “Weever’s role as target for many of the unflattering dramatic lampoons of the Poets’ War suggests that the aspiring author’s opinions about Marston, Jonson, and Shakespeare may in fact have remained consistently negative between 1599 and 1601.” (Jones 85) Bednarz also addresses more criticism from other writers and “according to Guilpin, Jonson is a satirist who is both physically and psychologically deformed, a grotesque of nature who further distorts himself through his excessively belligerent posturing, in a berserk example of Renaissance self-fashioning.” (“Representing Jonson” 4) It is extremely important to take into account Jonson’s critiques in order to understand his ideas on poetry and theatre. Jonson himself was not shy when proclaiming his Humanistic concerns, but other writers manage to shed a light on this philosophy by pointing out incongruences in his thought process. Marston is considered his most important rival, and as such, he brings up some of the issues with Jonson and his poetry.

The most important surrogate for Jonson in Marston’s plays appears in *Histrionomastix* in the form of Chrisoganus. Apparently, Marston did not intend to offend Jonson, and was instead declaring his admiration for the seasoned playwright. It has been documented that

“Marston, we are told, set out to flatter Jonson in *Histrionomastix*, but Jonson misinterpreted the play and aggressively turned on his admirer because he either mistook Marston’s panegyric for satire or felt that Marston had invaded his privacy, since any biographical representation from a poetaster, no matter how flattering, merited contempt.” (Bednarz, “Representing Jonson” 2)

Even though Marston’s initial intentions may have been good, it is undeniable that the character of Chrisoganus might have been extremely offensive to Jonson. His character is mainly and foremost a poet-philosopher. He is “introduced as a philosopher dedicated to the pursuit of epistemological certainty, or that he advocates the acquisition of universal knowledge, in an educational program that fuses the liberal arts and the sciences.” (Bednarz, “Representing Jonson” 6) Chrisoganus constantly tries to apply

Humanistic ideals and believes himself capable to change society for the better. He struggles to sell his plays and educate other characters around him. Chrisoganus' defeat is intellectual due to him failing to educate those around him and thus, he is a hypocrite since he is not able to live by his own philosophic principles. Marston is then criticising the emptiness of Jonson's positivist and almost naïve Humanism. He "suggests that Jonson's humanism, although apparently lofty in its aspiration, is incapable of reforming even the one man who believes in it and who masks his excesses as its rule of law." (Bednarz, "Representing Jonson" 8) However, it is worth mentioning that even though Marston positions himself against Jonson, he is not criticising Humanism as a whole and does not challenge the epistemological basis of the English Renaissance. Marston differs from Jonson in that Jonson is a "poet laureate" a virtuous, centered, serious self, characterized by its knowledge of and fidelity to itself and the governing ethos of the age." (Bednarz, "Representing Jonson" 6) Marston critiques Jonson's inability to adhere to a true Humanistic program and live by it.

Once Marston's criticism is truly understood, it gives the reader an insight on Ben Jonson's philosophy. But of course, Jonson's perception of himself is as important as the satirical depictions of the poet that pointed out his sometimes conflicting ideas.

Jonson considered himself a true poet who followed the great tradition of classic writers. As a Humanist, Jonson relied on many translations done at the time in Europe, filtered by Italian influences. His philosophical background is heavily influenced by the notion that literature could and should be used to teach others and make society better. Knowledge is used as a didactic tool and the poet, the true poet, is the one in charge of wielding it and create a wiser society. Jonson embodies the main philosophical beliefs of the Elizabethan period. From Jonson's point of view, "the Poets' War involved a basic philosophical issue, a debate on the theory of literature that came into being as a result of Jonson's insistence on a new and dignified status for the poet, based on principles of academic humanism." (Bednarz, "Representing Jonson" 23). Ben Jonson fashions himself as a poet in contrast with the poetaster, as depicted in his play with the same name. In *Poetaster*, Jonson presents a true poet with characteristics extremely similar to those of Jonson. He has a function in society, sharing his knowledge, which gives the poet a more prevalent status in society.

Ben Jonson becomes the voice for a more elevated and less attainable literature. Both the poet and his art are above worldly considerations. Jonson is then starting to plant the seeds of this debate on literary production that blossomed one century later in England.

### **III. John Marston: the Cynical poet**

Ben Jonson's most bitter rival was John Marston. The poet was so disliked by Jonson that he attacked him not only in the literary field but also in real life. There are testimonies of Jonson pointing at him with a pistol and threatening his physical integrity. Marston was younger than Jonson, and when he started to write against him, he did not have a malicious intent. He admired Jonson, but it is clear that "in evaluating Jonson, Marston was announcing his own arrival." (Bednarz, "Representing Jonson" 2) Even though he was not as disliked as Jonson in literary circles, who was mercilessly mocked for his physical appearance, he also acquired some rivals in his rise to popularity. Other

writers like Weever criticised both Jonson and Marston in his epigrams, but certainly not as fiercely as Jonson. As explained before with Ben Jonson, it is as important to analyse both Marston's critics and Marston's perception of himself as a poet in order to establish his philosophical compass.

If Chrisogonus in *Histriomastix* perfectly represents Jonson, Marston is best portrayed by two characters from Jonson's plays. The first one is Clove in *Every Man out of His Humour*, the direct response to *Histriomastix*. Jonson, taking issue with Marston's criticism in term of his quality as a poet, makes Clove an example of bad diction. Clove is "an intellectual charlatan, who briefly enters *Every Man Out* for the sole purpose of rattling off examples of eccentric diction, culled in part from *Histriomastix* and the verse satire of *The Scourge of Villain*." (Bednarz, "Representing Jonson" 2) According to Jonson, Marston completely ignores the beauty in poetry and destroys its aesthetical integrity with empty words and a pedantic attitude. Clove (and therefore Marston) does not have any respect for true poets like Jonson and he is not comparable to the elevated poetry of real dramatists.

Clove seems to be a knee-jerk reaction for Jonson after Marston's first critical play, and quickly pointed out Marston's lack of poetic disposition. Clove acts as Jonson's immediate reply to *Histriomastix*, but he further emphasises his attacks in *Poetaster*. *Poetaster* might be the compilation of Jonson's ideas on Marston and subsequently, bad poets. It was written "in a prophylactic urgency against the threat of being staged as 'Horace'. While the defensive handling of the Horace figure acts to portray Jonson as nobly aloof, immune to detraction, loyal to a virtuous price and to the court of true poets, the highest comic moment of the play settles a personal score in a much more direct fashion." (Baines et al. 8) Marston is depicted as Crispinus, another boastful poet with terrible diction. It is quite remarkable the allegory Jonson uses to depict Marston's language, described as full of neologisms and poorly crafted. There is a scene in which: "Horace (Jonson's thinly disguised persona) feeds Crispinus (Marston's surrogate) pills that cause him to disgorge twenty-eight words and phrases." (Bednarz, "Writing and Revenge" 29) This purge scene is recycled from Lucian's *Lexiphanes*, making even clearer that Jonson follows the path of classic writers while Marston regurgitates a concoction of words devoid of all meaning that try to resemble true poetry. Jonson calls him a poetaster, who unlike him, does not understand the elevated aspects of poetry.

John Marston's definition of poet and poetry is if not radically opposed at least not compatible with Jonson's ideas. Marston writes against Jonson because he feels that Jonson's Humanistic perceptions are not applicable to reality. Jonson fails to live by true Humanistic doctrines and he positions himself above the rest of society as a beacon of light and knowledge. Marston instead tries to bring poetry and poets closer to the public domain. He does not see himself as a guide, or at least he does not think any writer can attain this almost divine authority. This constant questioning of literature's didacticism and the role of the poet has been defined by Bednarz as subjectivity, naturalism and representative of a counter Renaissance. I would rather use a more concrete term: Cynicism. Marston rejecting Renaissance literary conventions of the role of the poet and poetry makes him a Cynical playwright that challenges the widely spread Humanism. It is important to note that:

"What is different about Marston, as critics have long noticed, is the degree to which his faith in the humanist program of right reason and didactic satire is constantly erased by doubt that leads to a new and critical phase in the development of Renaissance satire, one



in which the standard of self-knowledge is replaced by subjectivity.” (Bednarz, “Representing Jonson” 20)

Nevertheless, Marston does not emerge as the philosophical opponent of Humanism. While he questions some aspects of it, he does not dispute the ideological pillars of Elizabethan drama. However, he certainly expresses a lingering doubt about Ben Jonson’s poet-philosopher who uses poetry as a tool for bettering his peers. This slight disagreement gives Marston a Cynical aspect in his playwriting. Bednarz summarises Marston clash with Jonson as being:

“True that the moral drive of Marston's satire is never entirely obviated, even as it collides with a sense of the impossibility of reform. But what separates Marston from his two rivals is their unequivocal commitment to the idea of their own moral and literary authority. Marston viewed Jonson and Hall as possessing a set of values based on right reason and Stoic self-sufficiency, out of which they commanded the authority of punitive satire.” (“Representing Jonson” 20)

Marston creates an early split in the understanding of poetry and the role of the poet. This division would be formalised almost a century later, and it would be unfair to credit this debate to the two philosophies at play during the Poetomachia. Nonetheless it is true that “Marston's attack on the public theater *Histrionastix* epitomizes the growing split between elite and popular culture that inevitably lead, half a century later, to the open class conflict of the English Revolution.” (Bednarz, “Marston’s Subversion” 104)

Ben Jonson and John Marston’s debacle repeats itself many times embodied by different writers and different literary movements. However, its core remains the same. Should the poet be a guide to the people since they hold truth by creating elevated poetry? Or should the poet accept his lack of knowledge and favour a popular literature?

## VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Poetomachia serves as a battlefield for not only Ben Jonson and John Marston but also Humanism and Cynicism, which illustrates an early debate on the role of the poet and poetry. Jonson and Marston’s philosophical ideas have been analysed through the eyes of each other as rivals and as they defined themselves. On the one hand, Jonson’s most memorable parodic version of himself is Chrisoganus in John Marston’s *Histrionastix*. Chrisoganus is an oblivious poet who thinks himself to be above everyone else. He believes in a Humanistic program but fails to adhere to it and create a more cultivated and refined society. He is a poet-philosopher whose excessively naïve ideas about his own grandiose role make him a target for criticism. Jonson was indeed a Humanist and considered that the poet should have a new dignified role and literature should be used as a path for wisdom. He aligned himself with a more complicated and distinguished poetry, against what he believed fake poets such as Marston. It is Jonson’s ideas on the role of the poet and poetry that suggest a new angle in the dichotomy of elite and popular literature. Marston on the other hand also appeared in Jonson’s plays as many characters, but two that exemplify his stance are Clove in *Every Man out of His Humour* and Crispinus in *Poetaster*. Clove is memorable due to his terrible diction, making him a fake poet or poetaster. Crispinus is a more extreme example of the poetaster since he literally vomits out his words, which are heavily frowned upon by Jonson who considers that he just misuses new, meaningless language. Marston opposes Jonson in disagreeing

with him in the notion that the poet has all truth and poetry being the vehicle for spreading it. This makes Marston a Cynical poet in comparison to Jonson, standing his ground against him but not truly challenging Humanist philosophy. By planting the seed of doubt in Humanism, he becomes the antithetic rival of elite poetry, instead endorsing a more popular and accessible style. Although the Elizabethan period is not known for a clash between these two understandings of literature, these writers develop the basis for a dialectical argument that would flourish in later centuries. The breach between an elevated poetry and poetry with a more simplistic approach is partially born out of the philosophical differences between Jonson and Marston, who unknowingly contributed to one of the most fascinating debates on the very nature of literature. The origins of one of the most controversial topics for writers and scholars alike could have been completely different today if Jonson and Marston had not decided to quarrel with each other and confront two antagonistic philosophies, posing the question of the role of the poet and poetry and thus shaping literature for the centuries to come.

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