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The Art of Declining Invective in Ben Jonson's Poetaster

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In the play he called *Poetaster*, first performed in 1601, Ben Jonson indulged himself in a not-so-covert attack upon two of his fellow playwrights and one-time collaborators, John Marston and Thomas Dekker, coming as close to outright invective in his representation of them as those censorious times would allow.¹ Despite his feisty persona as the self-styled and sanctimonious champion of high poetic culture against the pretensions of upstarts and hacks, Jonson had to proceed with caution, for the authorities had recently clamped down on satiric libel,² the theatre was under scrutiny, and his opponents were far from helpless, having a play of their own ready for the boards in which he was to be “untrussed”. *Poetaster* represents the ultimate salvo on Jonson's side to secure his own name and reputation following a three-year exchange of theatrical badinage

- 1 The play was entered into the Stationers' Register on December 21, 1601 by Matthew Lownes. Jonson was no doubt looking for early publication to confirm his position in the feud and to further induce readers to his side, recognising, perhaps, that print is the more natural medium for invective.
- 2 Following a spate of cankerous satires in the 1590s, the Privy Council, in the spring of 1599, decreed that such writings were a menace to the state. On 1 June, John Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Richard Bancroft, Bishop of London, issued a list of scurrilous books to be publicly burned, titles that included writings by Thomas Lodge and John Marston.

referred to by Dekker as the “poetomachia”, and by theatre historians as “the war of the theatres”, the events of which have been anatomized in considerable detail.³ It all began, in Jonson’s words, when Marston “represented him on the stage” (*Conversations with Drummond of Hawthornden*, p. 27). Jonson boasts in that same entry in his *Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden* that already he had “had many quarrels with Marston”, had beaten him and taken his pistol from him, the irony of it all being that in the ostensibly offending portrait of Chrisoganus, taken for Jonson, in Marston’s *Histrion-mastix* (1599), he had intended to pay his fellow writer a compliment.

In extending the feud, rival acting companies realized the commercial advantage in staging raillery that involved combatants of little interest to the state, so long as they kept the point-counter-point confined to theatrical mud-slinging under the guise of fictional characters. Yet with Jonson, such containment was never sure, for he had already killed an actor in a duel,⁴ and in *Poetaster* itself, his reputation is called to memory by Purgus, who warns the others concerning Jonson’s *alter ego* in the play, “take heed how you give this out, / Horace is a man of the sword” (IV.vii.16-17). This is also a reminder of how closely invective is related to honour combat and physical assault even to the death. For Jonson, satire may represent his great vision for the improvement of society, but invective, within that satiric enterprise, is never far removed from his dangerously pugnacious instincts. Jonson was touchy about his humble origins and his apprenticeship to his step-father’s trade of bricklayer—a favourite topic of his enemies—and he was sensitive to the likes of Marston, who had a family coat of arms and openly claimed gentry status. Jonson’s deprecatory language in the

3 A concise history may be found in Brock, pp. 292-93. But the history of the “war” can be said to begin with Penninman’s *The War of the Theatres* (1897), to continue with Small’s *The Stage-Quarrel Between Jonson and the So-Called Poetasters* (1899), and to arrive at documentary exhaustion in Omans’s Ph.D. thesis, “The War of the Theatres: An Approach to its Origins, Development and Meaning” (1969). The subject is treated by Herford, Simpson and Simpson in their monumental edition of Jonson’s works, and by all of his biographers, such as Barton (pp. 58-91, *passim*). Noteworthy is the fact that most of the plays were presented by child actors: Marston wrote for Paul’s Children and Jonson for the Children of the Chapel at Blackfriars.

4 The victim was Gabriel Spencer, an actor in the company of Philip Henslowe. The duel took place in Hoxton Fields in September of 1598, thus about the time the “War of the Theatres” began. The cause of the feud is unknown. Jonson was imprisoned in October, was tried and confessed, but managed to escape hanging by pleading benefit of clergy. His goods were confiscated and he was branded as a malefactor on his thumb. Jonson says he was also wounded during the quarrel, and that Spencer’s sword was 10 inches longer than his. See Brock, p. 259.

play may target a poetaster whose diction smells of the inkhorn, but in proving himself the better dramatic orator, he also assaulted the personhood of the character representing Marston, including his self-esteem, physical appearance, *parvenu* social ambitions, pedigree, trivial ethics, and political influence. Claiming never to name persons but only to censure the vices of the age, Jonson nevertheless delivers broadside invective by sharing out the tactics of assault among the characters and ventriloquizing his own voice through the satires of the Roman poet, Horace, who, by convention, is merely himself in the play. Having used up his credit with the law, Jonson dared no more physical bullying, but, claiming extreme provocation, he was prepared to stretch the conventions of the theatre to their limits, under his high classicizing strain, to wield language as a weapon in murdering at least the integrity and reputation of his opponent.

Jonson's evasive design was to disguise the society in which he embedded himself and his opponents as a humanist fantasy, in which Augustan Rome is brought to the stage in a portrait of high society, including the Imperial court. The great writers from Ovid to Virgil and their famous patrons, figures familiar to Renaissance scholars and schoolboys alike, are assembled and placed in their pecking order, in accordance with Jonson's critical predilections and their general reputations among humanists. Just as Jonson legitimizes his own aggression by adopting the Horatian voice and persona as his own, he also realizes a fantasy in that same persona of assigning himself to the inner circle of the court, if only the Augustan court, where Caesar, as Virgil's patron, places the epic writer in a chair above his own to recite from the *Aeneid*, surrounded by the poetic luminaries of that age. At the same time, this distinguished circle is called upon by Caesar to function as a law court to sit in witty judgement upon the talentless intruders and false witnesses. Marston, meanwhile, is assigned to the character Crispinus, a despised philosopher who appears in Horace's satires. With a touch of poetic license, he is also made to serve as the boor who provokes Horace to invective after dogging him in the streets in search of the great man's critical approbation and a share in the largesse of his patron.⁵ Dull, but not ultimately indifferent to Horace's withering scorn, to revenge himself he turns false informant, accusing

5 The "blear eyed" Crispinus is mentioned by the scholiasts as an "aretalogus", one who babbles of virtue and writes trivial verse, a stoic despised by Horace; see *Satires*, I.3.120, I.3.139, I.4.14, and II.7.45. He is combined with Maevius, the poetaster of Epode 10 cursed to die of shipwreck. Dekker's character, Demetrius, is derived from Satire I.10.78-80, where he tortures Horace by carping at him behind his back.

Horace of treason. This was Jonson's greatest ploy in disguising his imprecatory purposes, for in displacing his action to the ancient world, the play takes on the ethos of an era in which poets upheld the glory of the state and Cicero's high indignation against traitors and malefactors rang out in the tribunals. His own persona was not only the Horace of the epodes and satires, but the Horace who was the excellent and true judge of poetry by an interior assurance that Jonson authorizes with the words, "because he knew so" (*Discoveries*, Herford, Simpson and Simpson, eds., VIII: 642 [l. 2594]). As David Riggs suggests, Jonson was looking for the "license granted to classical authors" (p. 58). He wanted to recover his own assumed entitlement to speak truth in relation to the public good. Such a play might then pretend to the highest of social purposes, which was nothing less than the reification of Roman standards in his own times, making poetry and critical discourse the choicest instruments in the maintenance of civility and the urbane life. In such an ideological order, invective was merely the acknowledged instrument whereby the ideal state was protected from the polluting effect of the envious and malicious in their failure to distinguish between true virtue and their own vanity. In this way, like Horace, he sought to defend the necessity of his own art, in which truth is asserted in the place of libel, even though in doing so he appeared to contravene the laws, for, as he declares in the play, "I will write *satyres* still in spite of fear" (III.v.100).

His noble ideology as satirist and public benefactor notwithstanding, Jonson was on a barely controlled rampage in the spirit of the invective endorsed and practiced by ancient orators and rhetoricians. His own *amour propre* indubitably wounded, Jonson was out for a kind of revenge, not only in styling his principal opponent as a salon crawler and boor turned informant, but in creating dramatic confrontations in which the man is condemned to hearing himself abused to his face with a round of epithets and name-calling parceled out to Horace and others, including Tucca, the bluff, braggart soldier, who abuses indiscriminately anyone he can verbally domineer. Each occasion provides Jonson with an opportunity to turn wit into injury. In the end, Crispinus finds himself arraigned by an impromptu court made up of the received poets of the age. Their notion of poetic justice for a transgressor reduced to a poetaster is to administer to him an emetic with the peculiar property of forcing him to retch up the contents, not of his stomach, but of his pseudo-poetic mind, in the form of ludicrous neologisms and pompous diction. Such a purge pretends to be a cure, but it serves rather as the ultimate gesture of humiliation, in which, if style is

the man, the man has been reduced to vomit. In the words of the indictment read out by Tibullus, “You are, before this time, jointly and severally indited, and here presently to be arraigned, upon the statute of Calumny, or Lex Remmia”—Crispinus as “Poetaster and plagiarist”, Demetrius as “play-dresser, and plagiarist” (V.iii.214-20). Of the thirty-four terms disgorged, only fifteen may today be found in Marston’s works, confirming still that Marston alone was intended by the portrait. Moreover, theory holds that the remaining nineteen were expunged during the revision for subsequent publication of such plays as *What You Will*, the originals of which have been lost (Herford, Simpson and Simpson, eds., IX: 578-79). Presumably, Marston learned something from this harsh experience. Among the hard words were “glibbery”, “lubricall”, “magnificate”, “snotteries”, “turgidous”, “ventositous”, “prorumped”, and “obstupefact”, words we may rejoice to have been eliminated by Jonson’s censorious ear. The administrators of the purge, poets all, emphasized the egregiousness of such verbal confections by repeating them and commenting upon how hard it was to get them up. Such was the dramatic climax to a play that promised a knock-out blow to those who had gotten under Jonson’s skin, thereby provoking his most vitriolic muse. It was perhaps as much as a troupe of boy actors could be brought to play after so many acts of name-calling and vituperation. But while to some it may seem too timid and too late, for others it was altogether juvenile and excessive. For John Enck, it was little more than “horseplay that offends by its pseudo delicacy”, a “grim business, which extends to sadistic lengths”, like “the bullying humility of a fifth-former beating his fag into conformity” (p. 80). But even as “horseplay”, its intent is clear, which is, through the strategies of invective, to demolish Marston’s reputation as a poet, gentleman, and intellectual through an assault upon his verbal judgement. Drama demanded a dramatic solution, an enactment, an emblematic transaction, such as the purge scene, that serves in the place of pure verbal assault. But the power of invective remains because the audience, in tune with the *comédie-à-clef*, saw the historical man in the character hailed before a court, not only as a reprobate and enemy to the state, but as a poet of puff-paste intelligence.

That Jonson was building consciously and cogently upon the tradition of humanist invective is substantiated by his disclaimers in the “apologetically Dialogue” (*Poetaster*, p. 317 [l. 3]) appended to the play as an address “To the Reader” (pp. 317-24). This was a wound-licking exercise following the production of Dekker’s *Satiromastix*, in which, for one last time, Jonson was abused in

a stage portrait. The dialogue was given one airing in the theatre before it was suppressed by the authorities, although it was surreptitiously reinserted at the time of the publication of his plays in 1616. Jonson profiles himself as the pouting but defiant “Author” of *Poetaster*, the innocent victim of three years of libel and abuse, which had at last stung him into action. In the dual attitude characteristic of the maker and receiver of invective, he professes himself above the malice of their “blacke vomit” (p. 318 [l. 37]), yet hears from his interlocutors how he had been veritably hit and injured. He returns to name-calling, referring to the makers of *Satiromastix* as “the barking students of Beares-Colledge, / To swallow vp the garbadge of the time / With greedy gullets” (p. 318 [ll. 45-47]). He professes to have told the truth in all he said of them in taxing their crimes, while for their part, they merely indulged in plagiarism, filth, and excrement. But the war was clearly over, because Jonson had no heart to try to outdo his own performance or theirs; he was reconciled to the fact that Virgil and Horace had their detractors, and that as Horace *redivivus* in the play, he could go no further. Yet in the spirit of pure invective, he boasts of what he might have done if “Arm’d with Archilochus fury”, writing such iambics as “Should make the desperate lashers hang themselves”, and of how he might “Rime ’hem to death, as they doe *Irish* rats / In drumming tunes” (161-64), before leaving them to the whips of their own guilty consciences. This is the Horace still of the imprecatory satires and epodes—one of those epodes about a former slave, another about a libeler who had attacked one of his friends, and the last about Maeuius, the poetaster cursed to die at sea. Archilochus is, of course, the celebrated seventh-century B.C.E. Greek satirist, who turned his withering iambics upon Lycambes when the latter refused him his daughter in marriage. So terrible was the force of his words that, after they were read out at the festival of Demeter, both father and daughter hanged themselves.⁶ More will be said below of the power of words over things as though imbued with magic, and of the imprecatory curse that is self-fulfilling in the imaginations of those targeted. Jonson displays such weapons, together with a clear knowledge of their traditions, uses, and efficacy in relation to a play that had been calculated to kill as well as to purge, for, as Enck concludes, “With Jonson, in whom nothing is proportionally life-sized, the attack on poetasters carried more invective than usual” (p. 70).

6 See Elliott, p. 7.

In a further allusion, he places himself at the very heart of the classical invective tradition, refusing to waste more time “With these vile *Ibides*, these unclean birds, / That make their mouthes their clysters, and still purge / From their hot entrails” (219-21). “*Ibides*”, without doubt, refers to the literary quarrel from Alexandria involving Callimachus, who cursed his enemy, Apollonius of Rhodes, under the name of Ibis, not only because the bird ate garbage around the Egyptian markets, just as Apollonius was said to feed off the scraps of Homer, but more scatologically because the bird possessed the remarkable ability to purge itself by shoving its water-filled beak up its own fundament.⁷ In the play, Jonson reduces this to an emetic, taking his cue from the *Lexiphanes* of Lucian, in which a rhetorician’s surfeit of words is cured with a vomit administered by the physician Sopolis.⁸ Nevertheless, the Ibis allusion ties Jonson’s thoughts to a literary feud of classical standing having features resembling his own situation. Ovid, too, wrote an “Ibis” poem, an exercise in erudite invective, in which he speaks of the verbal savagery of the Thracians, who went so far as to murder their guests (*Ibis*, ll. 381-82, 401-2). In these poems, as with the Jonson-Marston feud, the injuries redressed were often trivial, but the intent of the words was brutal. Such disputes were, simultaneously, occasions for rhetorical display of a highly entertaining nature, confirming Northrop Frye’s astute observation that “invective is one of the most readable forms of literary art, just as panegyric is one of the dullest” (p. 224). We enjoy hearing people denounced and fools exposed as part of our own pleasure-seeking natures, provided there is a modicum of wit and invention. We enjoy them as finer expressions of our own complex social instincts for managing the survival of the self within groups through the adverse verbal construction of the conduct of rivals and threats. These tactics are never practiced without risk—hence, the particular delight we take in watching the writer of invective establish his own integrity and security as he makes the case against his opponent.

To the extent that *Poetaster* really is about poetry, it assumes a place in the humanist tradition of invective against those deemed to be abusers of the art. Callimachus had a falling out with a former associate, leading to conventional complaints concerning borrowing and plagiarism, matters of influence, and the failure to achieve a noble and independent social vision. The themes are redeveloped at length by Antonio da Rho in his *Philippic against Antonio Panormita*,

7 See Watson, p. 123.

8 This reference was first noted by James Upton in his pamphlet, *Remarks on Three Plays of Benjamin Jonson* (1749, p. 3); see Herford, Simpson and Simpson, eds., IX: 577-78.

a feud which, as with Jonson and Marston, arose between two men backing rival professional positions and which led by degrees from misunderstanding to blatant verbal assault. By 1429, Rho had Latin poems in circulation denouncing Panormita, followed by letters, leading to an all-out literary war. In the *Philippic* he then denied writing any preliminary provocations. Rho, like Jonson, stood up for his personal values and standards, styling himself the modest, humble, sincere man, esteemed by his friends, the innocent victim of the other's malignity. The similarities need not be evidence of influence, but may merely testify to the *sui generis* defence tactics of the rhetorical mind preoccupied with similar professional circumstances.⁹ Correct Latin style and the "oratio inepta" were constantly under scrutiny amid the accusations. Rho's target was, elsewhere, Lorenzo Valla, who began in a light-hearted way to point out the Latin errors of the other until feuding broke out through insult and invective. Again, rivalry and professional envy played a part, as each looked askance at the *succès d'estime* of the other and made accusations of plagiarism. This led Rho to a peroration in the form of a beast fable, in which he assigns himself the role of the lion, while relegating his opponent to that of the ass (*The Apology of Antonio da Rho . . . against a Certain Archdeacon and his Loathsome Sycophant Accomplices*, ed. Rutherford, p. 241). The degree to which Jonson's engagement in the War of the Theatres was conducted as an active and conscious production in Renaissance literary invective is a moot point. But that the profiles of those feuds all seem to follow a common course and psychology is reason enough to urge comparison, not so much at the level of literary genre as at the level of generic human strategizing within competitive verbal environments.

One scene in *Poetaster* that epitomizes Jonson's skills at invective is the first of Act Three. It is a dramatized re-enactment of Horace's Satire I.9, throughout which Jonson taxes Crispinus as a tedious and pedantic poet, not only for his solecisms and "worded trash", but also for his sartorial foolishness and affected manners, while professing his own "tame modestie". As a character in the play, Horace's sober disdain highlights the enacted portrait of Crispinus as a prating poet, singer, and idle talker, indifferent even to the death of his own father, who concludes by demanding that Horace share his patron Mecoenas (III.i.253). The exchange allows Jonson to include such epithets as "base grovelling minds", styling his assailant as a "Land-Remora", the fish described by Pliny for its sucking

9 See Rutherford, ed., *passim*.

mouth by which it attaches itself to the bottoms of boats in great numbers, slowing their progress. Trebatius, the lawyer and Horace's friend, joins in the execration, while the dullness of Crispinus, meanwhile, incites the satirist to ratchet up his attack. It is a clever exercise in humanist poetics and Renaissance *imitatio*, a way of declining to speak in his own voice while performing an act of appropriation that serves in its stead, having behind it all the authority of classical invective.

Crispinus boasts of being a gentleman born (II.i.88), which sets him up for ridicule. Chloe makes mention of his shortness of stature, stating that true gentlemen have little legs. Meanwhile, in a mock description of his family coat of arms, Crispinus draws further attention to his class pretensions (II.i.95). Thus, by spontaneous discovery, or by design, the play touches upon the received categories of classical invective set out by Cicero and the rhetoricians. Under the category of *res externa*, such matters as a man's birth, education, citizenship, ancestry, status, manners, names, friends and associates, and occupation come under attack. Under the heading *res corpus*, there follows the denigration of a man's health, stature, deformities, debauchery, immorality, affected dress, and eccentric personal tastes. Finally, *res anima* covers his intrinsic character, corrupt or diminished intelligence, judgement, motives, and such traits as avarice, cowardice, vanity, shamelessness, cruelty, or superficiality, so that, by degrees, the unfavourable description of the parts constitutes a thoroughly depraved portrait. The final effect is a kind of hermeneutic loop, in which nature, style, and temperament explain the inevitability of criminal, antisocial, or debauched conduct, just as the conduct reveals the essence of the person. A favoured method for bringing truth to the portrait is to turn a man's own words against him through quotation. Such apparent truths are difficult to gainsay and work to devastating effect. Not surprisingly, Jonson hits Marston under all these headings, discrediting his judgement as a poet by discrediting his judgement as a person in several aspects of his social life, while having his own words witness against him in the purge scene. Always, we are mindful of the slights of rhetoric, the ambiguity of words, the tendency to hyperbole, the excesses of libel, the animus of the maker, the licence taken with dramatic portraits, and the faint of make-believe in the creation of such invectives. Without wit they are nothing, but if overly witty they become merely artistic creations and exercises in the resources of language. In his *Poetaster*, Jonson employs the conventions of the theatre to displace the properties of direct invective, but his purpose remains all along to profile an obnoxious and misguided socialite and poetiser with all the force of Cicero's demolition of

traitors in the name of the state. His own smug sense of superiority might have brought him to decline invective altogether, or so he would have us believe, until the outrageous lies put upon him necessitated the counter-attack. But even that ploy is part of the posture of the mode. He would urge that right poetry, if true and perfect, moulds the state, making men brave and ready to fight and die for the *patria* (V.i.17). It is a brilliant deployment of the myth of the Augustan age in justifying his own self-representation as Horace and his assault upon a Roman poetaster and corrupter of manners. Yet all along, it was pure spleen, as it was on the other side. Dekker's *Satiromastix* was still to come, perhaps to be written with Marston's collaboration, and Jonson knew it. In his preface "To the World" (*Satiromastix*, pp. 309-10), Dekker professes his own right to the law of talion, in the sense that those who offend in language should be punished in kind. Not surprisingly, Jonson is anatomized in an equally comprehensive and unflattering way for his manners, arrogance, and ambition, his envious and scrapping nature, his corpulence and his pock-marked face, compared with the lid of a warming pan full of holes for the escaping heat. Pretend as Jonson might to reticence through historicizing his setting and fictionalizing his portraits, the intended victims confirm their identities in their acts of retaliation. Read without these identifications, the play maintains a modicum of interest as a representation of Augustan Rome interpreted by a humanist scholar interested in the regulation of the social life of the state through a culture of high poetry. As a barely disguised invective, however, the play's hold upon readers vacillates between academic drama and epigrammatic assault, that assault itself divided between humours performed, exposed and ridiculed, and language tending toward the curse.

The economy of invective, including its power as a weapon of attack and self-defence, is the invention of man the speaking animal, who, through language, regulates social politics and pecking orders. It is a component of gossip, which is the quintessential activity whereby, through verbal communication, members of the collectivity protect themselves through an exchange of information from all individuals suspected or selectively proven to hold hidden agendas deemed detrimental to the survival of the group. Gossip is the counterpart to reputation, for reputation is the abstract quantification of the working esteem of the individual in relation to collective standards and expectations. All individuals must therefore seek to maintain a positive response from others and a sense of self-esteem.¹⁰

10 See Flyan, p. 10.

Because that esteem is established essentially through gossip, individuals within groups seek to assert positive information about themselves and run constant damage control through the micro-management of opinion. The contortions of invective writers pertain to just such exercises on a larger and more combative scale of name-clearing and counter-attack. Invective thereby seeks to do unto others what one most dreads to have done unto oneself, for it seeks to assassinate through language in order to reconfirm one's own social entitlements as a person of received integrity and worth.

The cause of the criminal lawyer, in mastering the art of invective, is to diminish the entitlements of a man not only presumed guilty of a specific crime, but more broadly demonstrated to be corrupt to the core, untrustworthy, a repeat offender, a perverted mind, a psychopath. Through a notion of correspondences, it was thought that a man's nature was as readily interpreted out of his physiognomy as from the report of his deeds. Hence, the assessment of character according to physical traits in the demonstration of crimes. The vying of two playwrights with one another for the place of prestige in the competitive environment created by rival theatrical companies would appear to be of an entirely different order, yet the verbal tactics were much the same. Perhaps to these men their places in the playwright's pecking order seemed like a matter of survival, one that depended not only upon their comparative talents, but upon their reputations and moral integrity as well. The "poetomachia" was more than a talent match; it was a form of gossip, in which the measure of talent was made to depend upon the full measure of the man—a little piece of the humanist mind-set run wild. Or it may simply be a law of society that, where there is equality among men, a process will arise whereby echelons and hierarchies will be constructed, through which the bullying alpha male is simultaneously the alpha dramatist.¹¹ This is in keeping with Northrop Frye's assessment of invective as "militant irony", a mode which, in fact, has little irony about it. Invective purports to be fact, assaulting the target directly, often with the risk of being too concise and direct, in an effort to make that person mutually loathed. An acquiescent audience joins in collusion with the calumniator, as in gossip clatches, in mutually descending an individual deemed a nuisance to the public or common good.¹² As with gossip, there must be an audience, as well as a speaker and an

11 See Riggs, p. 79.

12 See Frye, p. 223.

intended victim. Invective is the most aggressive form of news, whereby, in the name of the group, the reporter-as-prosecutor seeks to expose all that is hypocritical, parasitic, or undisclosed in the intentional states of the targeted individual through clear, forceful rhetorical profiling. But the economy is a dangerous one, because wit itself may be a devious means for gaining cruel advantage by playing upon the vulnerable imaginations of auditors, despite its careful appeal to truth and objectivity. Jonson's *Poetaster* works its measures in precisely this ambiguous economy.

What, then, of the power of words themselves to kill with all the efficiency of a verbal firing squad in the vein of Archilocus or the rhyming of Irish rats? This has to do with the power of invective not only over the imaginations of auditors, but over the imaginations of the victims themselves, insofar as each individual, in a sense, calibrates social currency according to a psychological Fort Knox of self-esteem. If invective guts the Federal Reserve, for those so sensitively inclined, despair may seem the only option. Invective takes its toll upon those carefully attuned to their own dependency upon social approbation. It may constitute an art of portraiture so powerful that a sense of comprehensive worthlessness appears beyond all countermanding. It is an instance in which *le mot* becomes *la chose*, when the power of the imagination becomes omnipotent, making defamatory naming tantamount to physical injury.¹³ Honour is a vital compulsion, a by-product of our gregarious natures and survival strategies. Insofar as language has achieved the power to create provisional versions of reality capable of invoking the most powerful of emotions and fears, language itself takes on the qualities of ritual magic, given the close alignment between signs, intentional states, beliefs and the unfolding of the material world. Invective seeks mastery over others, as opposed to inclusiveness, working as it does through public opinion to exclude, placing the destructive force not in the words but in the power of groups to ostracize. Yet it shares in intent with the curse, through which language is granted ritual power over the forces of chance and destiny, to the extent that victims believe superstitiously in the power of imprecation to harness and control destiny. That interplay between invective and cursing is seen in Horace's Epode 5, in which the victim vows that his tormentors will in turn be visited by the nightmare and suffocated, pelted to death by stones, then eaten by dogs and carrion birds. It may well be said that sticks and stones can alone break bones,

13 See Neu, p. 124.

while words are inoffensive. Yet the social dynamics of self-esteem and ritual fear of the magical power of words argues otherwise. Just as sorcerers might invoke devils by conjuring with words and signs, or priests might pronounce the magic words whereby wafers and wine are transubstantiated, so the writer of invective may conceive of the imprecatory effect of words upon the imagination of the victim not only as insults but as spells in control of the forces shaping the future.

In his *Poetaster*, Jonson indulges his voice of invective as in no other play, oriented as it is in the traditions of ancient Rome, displacing his own rancorous voice as he may in adopting the vocabulary of Horatian satire—the vocabulary of a man who, in his own times, had confronted envy and verbal assault. Formally, Jonson declines the role by adapting the conventions of the theatre to his ends, in a sense reducing invective to satire through the dissimulation of identities, the displacement of slanderous voices, and the transposition of setting. Moreover, he knew only too well that invective is dialogic, and that unless he could disguise his intentions, if not sting his victims into silence, the combat would continue until wits ran dry or the audience lost interest. Ironically, too, despite his outcry against cowardly or opportunistic informers, anonymous complaints over this very play were lodged with Chief Justice Popham, which might have led to very real corporal punishment, given that Jonson had already exhausted the patience of the law with his truculence and verbal brinkmanship.¹⁴ To decline invective was the greater part of valour. Jonson studied to have it both ways, yet he was never certain that he had avoided subsequent wrath or that he had seized the final word in his play. His apprehension is made clear in the “apologeticall Dialogue”, in which Polyposus reports of him, “O, vex’d, vex’d, I warrant you” (p. 317 [l. 15]). Jonson’s worry was not that he was guilty of all that he had been accused of in Dekker’s *Satiromastix*, but that the world was only too ready to believe it of him. Dekker was not without his power to hit, and now Jonson’s own imagination worked upon him in a way that spelled defeat in his own mind, making him, curiously, the biter bitten, despite his own blustering self-righteousness. Clearly, by then he had lost his taste for invective, for when his friends in this dramatic postlude ask if he will answer the libels, he declines, whereupon they declare

14 Herford, Simpson and Simpson, eds., IV: 201. The reference in the Preface is to the Chief Justice, to whom Jonson boldly dedicates the play in an effort to solicit his acquiescence to the play’s necessary strategy by a man more sinned against than sinning, abetted by the representation within the play of Horace’s own friendship with a leading Roman lawyer.

him to be undone with the world. It is then that he boasts of what he might have done but would not do, cursing them like Archilocus, rhyming them like rats, or purging them in the manner of the ibis, preferring rather to withdraw from society in defeat to devote himself to historical tragedy “high, and aloofe, / Safe from the wolves black jaw, and the dull asses hoofe” (238-39), in hopes that time and a different muse might restore where invective against his enemies had been deemed to fail.

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