

# Dramatic Style and Dramatic Language in Marston's Antonio and Mellida

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C RITICS of John Marston's plays often seem concerned to explain the "excesses" found in Marston's dramatic work. Explanation is given in terms of excess of spleen in the playwright or extremes of philosophical or psychological attitudes in the plays. Thus the plays are read as the work of an angry satirist turned dramatist or as the record of a battle between stoic and anti-stoic ideals. In the course of such readings Marston's dichotomies in diction, character, attitude and action are much puzzled over.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing the existence of elements so diverse and difficult of interpretation, I would suggest another avenue of approach, an approach made not through biography, philosophy or psychology, but through dramaturgy, aesthetics and language.

For Marston, when he gave himself to playwriting after the bishops' ban on satire in 1599, became a man of the theatre who now had to deal with aesthetic problems peculiar to drama. He had not only to conceive and verbalize but also to embody and enact. The fine fire of conception had somehow to be put on the stage. And when Marston came to try his hand at embodying a conception in tragic form, he had comparatively few contemporary models of tragedy before him — some fine ones, admittedly (*Doctor Faustus*, *Edward II*, *Richard II* and perhaps *Julius Caesar*), but the great years of tragic writing were to come after the turn of the century.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, his first efforts in tragedy, the Antonio plays, are experimental work, and they show both the

awkwardness and the vitality characteristic of essays in new directions.

The problem facing Marston was, in simplest terms, one of form. His tragic vision was one of a world gone absurdly askew, a world pursuing evil in place of good, a world in which even the stoical man is tempted from patience and endangered by the chaos which threatens to envelop all. Marston's vision is a searing one, his conception a passionate one. But how does a dramatist go about putting such a vision on the stage? What techniques can he use? I contend that Marston, writing the Antonio plays at the end of the century, when tragedy, trailing somewhat behind comedy and the history play, was still in its formative stages, experimented (rather clumsily, it will be admitted) with two basic methods of expressing his vision. Wishing to convey the utmost of human passion, he attempted, on the one hand, action and utterance pushed to the extreme of melodramatic explicitness. But simultaneously he experimented with emotion more subtly expressed through understatement, through the rhetorical and ritual use of language and gesture, and through the insertion into drama of song and the masque dance.

Let us look first at Marston's use of language. Marston seems always aware of the inability of language to express extremes of feeling and of beauty. Twice within the first act he has Antonio call attention to this failure of language. On first seeing Mellida, Antonio says:

Come down; she comes like — O, no simile  
Is precious, choice or elegant enough  
To illustrate her descent. (I.i.151-53)

And again:

But visit Venice, kiss the precious white  
Of my most — nay, all epithets are base  
To attribute to gracious Mellida. (I.i.229-31)

At moments of greatest stress language stutters and becomes inarticulate, and something else must be found to fill the silence.

Marston's search for that something else is interestingly illustrated in a double outburst of anger on the part of Duke Piero. Upon discovering the plan of his daughter Mellida to run off against his wishes with Antonio, this is Piero's response:

Run, keep the palace, post to the ports,  
go to my daughter's chamber. Whither now?  
scud to the Jew's; stay, run to the gates;  
stop the gondolets; let none pass the marsh;  
do all at once. Antonio his head, his head!  
Keep you the court; the rest stand still, or  
run, or go, or shout, or search, or scud, or  
call, or hang, or do-do-do, so-so-so-some-  
thing. I know not who-who-who-what I do-do-do-  
nor who-who-who-where I am. (III.ii.170-77)

Rage reduces him to stuttering and his speech literally splutters out. Marston has taken the explicit expression of anger as far as it will go. But he perhaps was not satisfied with the dramatic result. For eighty lines later, in similar circumstances, when Piero learns that Mellida has escaped in spite of his hunt for her, Marston gives him this speech:

Pursue, pursue, fly, run, post, scud away!  
Fly, call, run, row, ride, cry, shout, hurry, haste;  
Haste, hurry, shout, cry, ride, row, run, call, fly.  
Backward and forward, every way about. (III.ii. 261-64)

Prose has been replaced here by verse, and Piero's stuttering rage has given way to patterned speech of the most formalized, rhetorical kind. The deliberate inversion of the second and third lines transforms Piero from raging parent into Renaissance rhetorician as Marston experiments with the varying powers of language. Here he opposes verbal naturalism, which degenerates into inarticulateness, to rhetorical patterning of a highly stylized sort. Such clearly defined opposition cannot be accidental. Rather, it is evidence of Marston's deliberate exploration of the techniques available to the dramatist who must embody passion in stage action and stage language.

Through the character of Mellida Marston experiments with another of these techniques: the power of under-

statement, the effectiveness of restrained, carefully controlled utterance in which simplicity is the keynote. Early in the first act we find this kind of response from Mellida to news of the (supposed) drowning of Antonio. To twenty lines of the most grisly description of shipwreck, Mellida's reply is a simple "Ay me" (I. i. 205). And after thirty-seven lines more of explicit description of Antonio's final anguish, when her lady-in-waiting inquires,

What makes my lady weep?

Mellida's response is merely,

Nothing, sweet Rosaline, but the air's sharp. (I.i. 245-46)

This controlled response from Mellida stands in sharp contrast to the violence of both speech and action in which Antonio engages. Indeed, in the opening speech of the play, he sets his tone of high passion:

Heart, wilt not break? And thou, abhorred life,  
Wilt thou still breathe in my enraged blood?  
Veins, sinews, arteries, why crack ye not,  
Burst and divuls'd with anguish of my grief?

(I.i. 1-4)

And no fewer than three times do the stage directions tell us that he "falls on the ground."<sup>3</sup> Bombastic language and violent motion are Antonio's regular response to the extremes of passion — anger, jealousy, grief and despair. In the character of Antonio, Marston, even while he recognizes the limits of language, consistently pushes language as far as it will take him. It is only late in the play, at the very end of Act IV, that Marston allows to Antonio Mellida's method of handling emotion. When Mellida, attempting to escape with Antonio, has been discovered and seized by her father, Antonio, in a response far different from his earlier frenzy, suddenly falls silent. Grief at her capture shows itself in silence:

*Lucio*: See how his grief speaks in his slow-pac'd steps;  
Alas, 'tis more than he can utter; let him go:  
Dumb solitary path best suiteth woe. (IV.ii. 23-5)

In similar fashion, Mellida, upon being reunited with Antonio, finds words inadequate to feeling. This time it is joy that Marston tells us cannot be verbalized:

Can breath depaint my unconceived thoughts?  
 Can words describe my infinite delight  
 Of seeing thee, my lord Antonio?  
 O no; conceit, breath, passion, words be dumb,  
 Whilst I instill the dew of my sweet bliss  
 In the soft pressure of a melting kiss:  
*Sic, sic, iuvat ire sub umbras.* (V.ii 218-24)

The dramatist here cedes word to gesture as Antonio and Mellida embrace. But two things are of special note. We must remember that the kiss given between two boy actors would be not a naturalistic but a formalized one. It would serve as a stage emblem signifying feeling rather than impersonating it. And we must take note of the Latin tag with which Mellida's speech concludes. We have here on a small scale and at an important moment in the play what has so puzzled Marston's readers on a larger scale in the play's climactic scene of reunion in Act IV. For there, at the moment of recognition between the lovers, Marston's dialogue abruptly and puzzlingly changes from English to Italian. For almost twenty lines Antonio and Mellida speak their love in a language foreign to their audience. Why they should do so has been the subject of considerable critical discussion. I would suggest that Marston's use of Italian here at a crucial moment in the play is further evidence of a doubtful attitude on his part toward the *discursive* power of language. At moments of peak emotion language may fail in its discursive power, but its power of incantation remains. I believe that it is this incantatory power of language that Marston calls upon here. For Marston's audience the Italian is not a vehicle for verbal meanings, but a kind of ritual chant signifying rather than describing the emotions felt. Whether this use of language works successfully for a given audience can be questioned, but I believe that it is with this form of communication that Marston is experimenting.

When we turn from language to action and gesture in the play, we discover the same kind of experimentation. Act II, scene i, displays this most clearly, for it offers first the ritual action of a masque through which Mellida's grief is shown in controlled, understated form, and then presents a wold outburst of rage from Antonio, who stands outside the masque actions. Mellida is led into the court revels by the two suitors of her father's choosing, and this trio is followed by two like groupings of ladies and gentlemen who join in the dance. The dialogue which accompanies the dance measure is congruent with the dance itself. It is patterned and formally rhetorical: the first suitor urges Mellida to "deign your ear" as he pleads his love; the second begs that she "with pleas'd eye/ Smile on my courtship" (II.i. 178, 186-87). This patterning is repeated in the combats of wit in which Rosaline and Flavia engage their partners. And the technique would be strikingly clear on the stage as, in the changes of the dance, each trio in turn is brought forward to speak its lines.

But what is the purpose of this patterning? It serves both to emphasize and control Mellida's grief over the loss of Antonio. Forced to part from her lover, to parley with other suitors, Mellida is distracted with grief. And Marston has a situation of high emotional content. How can it be most effectively actualized in dramatic terms? In this instance Marston chooses understatement, the understatement created by the overlay of good manners on intensely felt grief. These are Mellida's lines:

What said you, sir? Alas my thought was fix'd  
 Upon another object. Good, forbear;  
 I shall but weep. Ay me, what boots a tear!  
 Come, come let's dance. O music, thou distill'st  
 More sweetness in us than this jarring world;  
 Both time and measure from thy strains do breathe,  
 Whilst from the channel of this dirt doth flow  
 Nothing but timeless grief, unmeasured woe.

(II.i. 188-95)

The music and dance provide "time and measure" to control, to shape and point "timeless grief, unmeasured

woe." And Mellida's very ability to make this carefully balanced rhetorical statement shows the way in which emotion here is being dramatically controlled. The formalizing of her grief is a means of coming to terms with it dramatically, of putting it on the stage. And the effectiveness of this technique is not diminished by its being immediately juxtaposed with another display of passion. For Antonio, who in disguise has been watching the courting of Mellida, at this point can bear it no longer. He breaks into a rage of grief and jealousy:

O how impatience cramps my cracked veins,  
 And cruddles thick my blood with boiling rage.  
 O eyes, why leap you not like thunderbolts  
 Or cannon bullets in my rivals' face?

*Ohime infelice misero, o lamentavol fato.*

FALLS ON THE GROUND. (II.i. 196-200)

His outburst is as frenzied as Mellida's had been restrained. The passion felt by each of the lovers is comparable, but the techniques used to actualize it on the stage differ greatly. In fact, Marston has chosen the two extremes offered the dramatist in such a case: on the one hand, unbridled speech and violent action; on the other, muted words and strictly regulated movement. Which is the more effective expression of intense feeling must perhaps be left to the individual's taste in drama, but in my view, the figure of Mellida, pacing slowly through the patterns of the dance, distracted yet dignified, is more moving a figure than is Antonio in his bombastic and frenzied display.

That this juxtaposition is not accidental is made clear in Act V, scene ii, where it is repeated in slightly different fashion. Again a masque is presented; again Mellida, Rosaline and Flavia parley with suitors in the masque dance. Then suddenly, the masque is interrupted: "Cornets sound a sennet," and Andrugio enters in full armor (V.ii.132). In a moment of high excitement, Andrugio, with a price on his head, enters the court of his enemy, boldly raises his helmet and reveals himself. In this instance, Marston contrasts the controlled action of the

masque with a spectacularly melodramatic revelation as Andrugio claims for himself the reward offered for his capture or death. The technique is again one of effective contrast, and it is deliberate in its calculated execution.

There is one further point to be made with regard to Marston's experimentation in this play, and it has to do with his use of song. It has been noted that *Antonio and Mellida* is a play filled with singing. Not content with the music and dance of two court masques, Marston has filled his play with songs as well. I maintain that he has done so because he recognized that the "measure" of music, like the ritual pattern of dance and the formal use of language, is ultimately best suited not only to the expression of intense emotion but also to the arousal of like emotion in the audience. To move his audience is the dramatist's prime concern, and throughout this play Marston struggles with a double method of achieving this. His wish is to make *us* feel, and I believe he does this best through measure, pattern and restraint, through music, dance and formal language. Antonio describes the power of song to rouse passion when he urges his page to sing with these words:

I pray thee sing, but sirrah, mark you me,  
 Let each note breathe the heart of passion,  
 The sad extracture of extremest grief.  
 Make me a strain; speak groaning like a bell  
 That tolls departing souls.  
 Breathe me a point that may enforce me weep,  
 To wring my hands, to break my cursed breast,  
 Rave and exclaim, lie groveling on the earth.  
 Straight start up frantic, crying, "Mellida."  
 Sing but, "Antonio hath lost Mellida,"  
 And thou shalt see me, like a man possess'd,  
 Howl out such passion that even this brinish marsh  
 Will squeeze out tears from out his spongy cheeks,  
 The rocks even groan, and —  
 Pray thee, pray thee sing. (IV.i. 139-53)

The dramatist's aim is to raise his audience to the pitch of emotion which Antonio describes here. Paradoxically, it appears that this can best be done through the restraining power of form. Chaos breeds only chaos; it is form which defines, heightens, intensifies feeling, and



so brings it within the compass of an audience. Marston's ultimate task is not just to make Antonio and Mellida feel, but to make us feel, and in achieving this end, the play's most powerful weapons prove to be not bombast and hysteria, but understatement, measure and ritual control.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Examples of such criticism are: Morse Allen, *The Satire of John Marston* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1920); Michael Higgins, "The Convention of the Stoic Hero as Handled by Marston," *MLR*, 39 (1944), 338-46; Samuel Schoenbaum, "The Precarious Balance of John Marston," *PMLA*, 67 (1952), 1069-78; Theodore Spencer, "Reason and Passion in Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan*," *Criterion*, 13 (1934), 581-99; Paul M. Zall, "John Marston, Moralist," *ELH*, 20 (1953), 186-93.
- <sup>2</sup>I accept 1599 as the correct dating of *Antonio and Mellida*, as given by G. K. Hunter, ed., *Antonio and Mellida* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965). All citations from the play in my text are to this edition.
- <sup>3</sup>II.i.22; III.ii.184; IV.i.28.