

The Malcontent Redux: A Response to Brownell Salomon and William W. E. Slights*

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"A good wit will make use of anything."
(2 *Henry IV* 1.2.246-47)¹

Brownell Salomon's recent essay on *The Malcontent* in the second issue of *Connotations* raises two important issues, one about the play itself, and the other, implicitly, about the proper way to study it. Salomon's essay is perhaps best described as an extended meditation on the various ways in which "doubleness" (of language, character, theme, genre, technique, and so on) characterizes Marston's play; at the end of his discussion, Salomon offers his own contribution to the traditional approach to *The Malcontent* by demonstrating that its plot evinces yet another kind of "doubleness": fairy-tale form versus a realistic story of intrigue and counter-intrigue.

In the next issue of *Connotations*, William W. E. Slights responds to Salomon and is, well, not impressed. His banshee cry of indignation focuses on the, supposedly, moribund critical method Salomon employs. Slights questions the utility of Salomon's critical vocabulary and suggests that his conclusion is trivial:

Folklorists have known for decades that everything from the *Odyssey* to comic strips can depict a hero returning home, confronting a false hero, performing difficult tasks, being recognized, and so forth. (305)

The scorn here is palpable, but wholly unwarranted, in my view. In this response I want to show how useful Salomon's essay can be, and I also

*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.

hope to make a larger point about the need for “negative capability” in matters literary, from both sides of the yawning critical and theoretical gulf that divides us these days.

It must be admitted at the outset that Salomon overstates his case a bit. That a “unitary morphological system underlying the folk tale” (157) has been established is in some doubt. Propp’s syntagmatic approach to structure, which Salomon makes use of in his argument, differs markedly from the paradigmatic method of Lévi-Strauss, which relies on a “deep structure” of binary oppositions, e.g. dark/light, above/below, active/passive, and so forth.² More recent structural studies of the fairy tale or folktale, such as those by Dundes and Jones, challenge the universality of Propp’s method: Dundes points out that North American Indian folktales manifest a different structure than Indo-European tales; and Jones argues that “Snow White” and other fairy tales of “persecuted heroines,” though Indo-European in origin, evince their own distinctive structural patterns.³ Moreover, Propp’s “functions”—significant actions characters take in the course of the tale—simply cannot be established in a completely value-free way.

These and other objections notwithstanding, recent theory, especially poststructuralist theory, has *not* invalidated the work of Propp and other structuralists; instead, it has called structuralism into question—no more, no less. Unlike Slights, I find real significance in the fairy-tale “narrative spine” Salomon argues for, in part because it seems intuitively right, and in part because it leads to the important question of how some Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights make their audience aware of genre. Just as there was no sign put up in the theaters to indicate “Another Part of the Forest,” there was no extra-textual signal at the Blackfriars or the Globe to indicate whether the audience was about to watch a tragedy, comedy, or tragicomedy. How then does a playwright assure his audience that it is at a comedy or a tragicomedy, not a tragedy?⁴ Put another way, how do we know that it is a question of *when*, not *if*, Dogberry will “get his man”? How do we know that Angelo’s nefarious schemes will never be executed? The answers are surprisingly subtle and important for understanding comic and tragicomic technique. In *Measure for Measure*, the audience senses that the Duke can shed his disguise at any moment, thus guaranteeing that

Angelo can do no real harm. In *Much Ado*, the opening scene's quick shift from war to love (from tragedy to comedy) fixes the genre for us:

Claudio: O my lord,
 When you went onward on this ended action,
 I looked upon her with a soldier's eye,
 That liked, but had a rougher task in hand
 Than to drive liking to the name of love.
 But now I am returned and that war thoughts
 Have left their places vacant, in their rooms
 Come thronging soft and delicate desires,
 All prompting me how fair young Hero is,
 Saying, I liked her ere I went to wars.

Don Pedro: Thou wilt be like a lover presently. . . .

(1.1.284-94)

Because tragicomedy starts out like tragedy, it is particularly important for some authors (Shakespeare and Marston among them) to indicate the genre unobtrusively yet clearly. It is doubly important if characters are brought near to death, or seem to be near it. Consider, then, Malevole's "demise" in 5.4 once he has been "poisoned" by Mendoza—a scene Salomon discusses in his article. Are we to think that Malevole is really dead, as Celso thinks? I think not, and for two reasons. First, by this time, Altofront has established himself as superior even to Mendoza in the art of Machiavellian manipulation, and so we expect that he has foreseen Mendoza's likely response to the gift of the boxes. Second, and more important for purposes of the present argument, is the "narrative spine" Salomon uncovers in the play. If it works to assure us of a happy outcome, as Salomon implies and as I assert, then we know that the returned hero must still be alive, and the kind of laughter generated when Malevole "pops up" expresses relief that we are right, not relief that we were wrong. Sights may find such an analysis trivial and outmoded, but don't tell that to an actor, a director, or an audience. For them, the issue is paramount, as it should be.

Sights also objects to Salomon's insistence on "'doubleness,' contrasting pairs, dichotomies" (304), as if this kind of emphasis has no basis in reality. But surely it does. *The Malcontent*, after all, is one of a series of political plays in the Elizabethan-Jacobean period that insists on

“doubleness” again and again. Does Slight really believe that old-fashioned critics have invented “doubleness” in Richard II, Hal, Falstaff, Bolingbroke, Henry V, Vincentio, Prospero, Bussy D’Ambois, Bosola, Perkin Warbeck, and, of course, Altofront? Does he really maintain that the plays that contain these characters fail to enact “doubleness” on almost every level, including plot, character, form, and technique? Certainly part of Marston’s genius is to recognize this fact rather early on and to up the ante, so to speak, by writing a political play so full of contrasts and oppositions that they become the dominant mode of discourse and action in it.

Salomon does a real service by analyzing the ways in which Marston attempts to make “doubleness” complementary instead of contradictory. His analysis prompts me to ask afresh if Marston succeeds in making Altofront and his alter ego Malevole complementary. Perhaps the play is rendered incoherent because of Marston’s failure to harmonize the two personalities of Altofront, but I am beginning to think that a sophisticated, well-worked out relationship may exist. In short, like Hal in *1 Henry IV*, Altofront has found a way to have his cake and eat it too. Malevole is the person Altofront might have become if he had truly lost all heart and given in completely to the feelings of cynicism and frustration that must have nearly overwhelmed him when he lost his Dukedom and his wife. Altofront needs to let off a little steam, just as Hal needs a chance to be a typical young man and sow his wild oats for a while. Both characters rationalize their activities, one explicitly and the other implicitly, by making their actions part of a plan to restore the common good.

Marston’s special interest in the limits of Stoicism supports my hypothesis. Over and over in his plays, Marston shows us that stoic philosophy is flawed because passion will out; it simply cannot be eliminated or suppressed for long.⁵ Thus, Altofront needs to give Malevole free rein, for that is the only way, finally, to get rid of him. Moreover, the difference between Malevole and Altofront is that the latter manages not to lose his heart—the capacity to feel love for others, whether they deserve it or not. The heart—a central motif in *The Malcontent* (How’s that for an old-fashioned analysis?)—is what Mendoza and Malevole lack—but not Altofront. The heart is what gives Pietro

the ability to reform, and why Mendoza and Ferneze cannot. So Malevole is the escape valve that saves Altofront's capacity to rule with compassion, a capacity he demonstrates as the play ends. Whatever the validity of such an analysis, the central point is to demonstrate the evocative power of Salomon's essay.

Slights objects not only to Salomon's dichotomizing, but also to his use of a quotation from T. S. Eliot. Apparently Eliot is passé now, along with Plato, structuralism, and lifelike characters—all signs, I suppose, of being mired in "terribly sticky old methods" (302). Yet I think Salomon is exactly right to identify fairy-tale form as the "'something behind, more real than any of the personages and their action' which Eliot senses in *The Malcontent*" (Eliot 189-90; quoted in Salomon 161-62). In 1934, when *Elizabethan Essays* was first published, Eliot was already trying to make the transition from poet to playwright, and he was finding it difficult at best.⁶ The problem was how to convey his deepest intention—an overall vision of a Christian reality behind appearances to the contrary—in a *play*, where competing voices of powerful characters might well drown out the essence of what he had to say. Eliot was drawn to Marston (1) because the latter, like Eliot, had faced the problem of moving from poetry to drama; (2) because Marston, again like Eliot, shows in his address "To the Reader" and elsewhere in the printed version of *The Malcontent* an obsessive concern about being misinterpreted;⁷ and (3) because both Marston and Eliot, presumably, wished to impart much the same message to their respective audiences through the identical medium—poetic drama.⁸ Eliot felt the force of Marston's vision but could not account for it by any technical means he knew, thus his bewilderment, quite frankly stated, coupled with a good deal of admiration for Marston's achievement. A little imagination allows us to share Eliot's confusion. No Jacobean play I know, not even *Lear*, portrays more powerfully than *The Malcontent* the stench and corruption, the heartlessness and depravity, of a world seemingly without hope. Yet most readers sense a firm eschatological vision at the heart of Marston's play. How does he do it? Since Salomon's suggestion seems insignificant to Slights, perhaps he can enlighten us on this point. If not, then perhaps he should allow that Salomon's insight carries real force.

I want to conclude this response with what is probably a fruitless plea for tolerance. Traditional versus postmodern criticism is a war that need not be fought. But to avoid battle, both sides must exercise some "negative capability." Can't we agree that most authors strive for unity but in many ways fail to achieve it? That they use language but that language also uses them? That their insights are usually accompanied by corresponding blind spots? That literary works and "local pressures" may both be sources of a work of art? That authorial intention is complex and its recovery always in some doubt? That the idealized universal reader or spectator (which I use throughout this essay) is a fiction, but sometimes a useful one? And so on. I think agreement on most of these issues is possible, but in all probability will not solve the problem. The real divide may not be literary at all, but political, in the widest sense of the word. Feminism and cultural materialism seek change, and so does new historicism, though it despairs of finding any. To these newer new critics, structuralism often seems unyielding, hierarchical, and committed to the status quo. And all to often old-line critics see fresh approaches as nothing more than "hurly-burly innovation." Thus, we view each other as stereotypes, and alas, these stereotypes contain more than a little truth. Perhaps the answer is to evolve more neutral methods of analysis—an impossible dream according to some. In the meantime, a little respect (on both sides) would go a long way.

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NOTES

¹All Shakespeare citations are from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 4th ed., ed. David Bevington (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

²See Alan Dundes's introduction to Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd ed., rev. and ed. Louis A. Wagner (Austin: U of Texas P, 1968) xi-xvii.

³Steven Swann Jones, "The Structure of 'Snow White,'" *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm*, ed. Ruth B. Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1986) 183n11.

⁴I am indebted to an unpublished paper by Joseph Price for this important and provocative line of thought. The example from *Measure for Measure* is also Price's.

⁵Note, for example, the unresolved conflict between control and passion in *Antonio's Revenge*, and the emphasis on Neo-stoicism in *Sophonisba*.

⁶T. S. Eliot, *Elizabethan Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934).

⁷See "To the Reader," ll. 12-22; "Prologue," ll. 1-2; "Vexat censura columbas" (20); and the Induction, ll. 51 ff. (in which Webster may reflect Marston's anxiety) in the Revels Plays edition of *The Malcontent*, ed. G. K. Hunter (London: Methuen, 1975).

⁸Two fine discussions of the genesis of Eliot's plays and the critical and methodological difficulties he faced in turning from poetry to drama are both by Richard Badenhausen: "'When the Poet Speaks Only for Himself': The Chorus as 'First Voice' in *Murder in the Cathedral*," *T. S. Eliot: Man and Poet*, ed. Laura Cowan, 2 vols. (Orono, Maine: U of Maine P, 1990) 1:239-52; and "'Communal Pleasure' in a Uniform Culture: T. S. Eliot's Search for an Audience," *ELN* 29.3 (1992): 61-69.