

**Classic Poetry Series**

**John Marston  
- poems -**

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# John Marston(7 October 1576 – 25 June 1634)

John Marston was an English poet, playwright and satirist during the late Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. Although his career as a writer lasted only a decade, his work is remembered for its energetic and often obscure style, its contributions to the development of a distinctively Jacobean style in poetry, and its idiosyncratic vocabulary.

## <b>Life</b>

Marston's father was an eminent lawyer of the Middle Temple. The father first argued in London and then became the counsel to Coventry and ultimately its steward. John Marston entered Brasenose College, Oxford in 1592 and received his BA in 1594. By 1595, he was in London, living in the Middle Temple, where he had been admitted a member three years previously. He had an interest in poetry and play writing, although his father's will of 1599 expresses the hope that he would give up such vanities.

Marston's brief career in literature began with a foray into the then-fashionable genres of erotic epyllion and satire. In 1598, he published *The Metamorphosis of Pigmalian's Image and Certaine Satyres*, a book of poetry in imitation of, on the one hand, Ovid, and, on the other, the *Satires of Juvenal*. He also published another book of satires, *The Scourge of Villanie*, in 1598. (Marston issued these satires under the pseudonym "W. Kinsayder.") The satire in these books is even more savage and misanthropic than is normal for the decade's satirists.

Marston's style is, moreover, in places contorted to the point of unintelligibility: he believed that satire should be rough and obscure, perhaps because he believed (as did many other writers of the time) that the term 'satire' was derived from the Greek 'satyr-plays'. Marston seems to have been enraged by Joseph Hall's claim to be the first satirist in English; Hall comes in for some indirect flying in at least one of the satires. Some see <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/william-shakespeare/">William Shakespeare's</a> *Thersites* and *Iago*, as well as the mad speeches of *King Lear* as influenced by *The Scourge of Villanie*. Marston had, however, arrived on the literary scene as the fad for verse satire was to be checked by censors. The Bishop of London George Abbott banned the *Scourge* and had it publicly burned, along with copies of works by other satirists, on 4 June 1599.

In September 1599, John Marston began to work for Philip Henslowe as a playwright. Following the work of O. J. Campbell, it has commonly been thought that Marston turned to the theatre in response to the bishop's ban; more recent

scholars have noted that the ban was not enforced with great rigor and might not have intimidated prospective satirists at all. At any rate, Marston proved a good match for the stage—not the public stage of Henslowe, but the "private" playhouses where boy players performed racy dramas for an audience of city gallants and young members of the Inns of Court. Traditionally, though without strong external attribution, *Histriomastix* has been regarded as his first play; performed by either the Children of Paul's or the students of the Middle Temple in around 1599, it appears to have sparked the War of the Theatres, the literary feud between Marston, Jonson and Dekker that took place between around 1599 and 1602. In c. 1600, Marston wrote *Jack Drum's Entertainment* and *Antonio and Mellida*, and in 1601 he wrote *Antonio's Revenge*, a sequel to the latter play; all three were performed by the company at Paul's. In 1601, he contributed poems to Robert Chester's *Love's Martyr*. For Henslowe, he may have collaborated with Dekker, Day, and Haughton on *Lust's Dominion*.

By 1601, he was well known in London literary circles, particularly in his role as enemy to the equally pugnacious [Ben Jonson](http://www.poemhunter.com/ben-jonson/). Jonson, who reported to Drummond that Marston had accused him of sexual profligacy, satirized Marston in *Clove* in *Every Man Out of His Humour*, as *Crispinus* in *Poetaster*, and as *Hedon* in *Cynthia's Revels*. Jonson criticised Marston for being a false poet, a vain, careless writer who plagiarised the works of others and whose own works were marked by bizarre diction and ugly neologisms. For his part, Marston may have satirized Jonson as the complacent, arrogant critic *Brabant Senior* in *Jack Drum's Entertainment* and as the envious, misanthropic playwright and satirist *Lampatho Doria* in *What You Will*.

*The Return from Parnassus (II)*, a satirical play performed at St. John's College, Cambridge in 1601 and 1602, characterised Marston as a poet whose writings see him "pissing against the world" (Knowles 895).

If Jonson can be trusted, the animosity between himself and Marston went beyond the literary. He claimed to have beaten Marston and taken his pistol. However, the two playwrights were reconciled soon after the so-called War; Marston wrote a prefatory poem for Jonson's *Sejanus* in 1605 and dedicated *The Malcontent* to Jonson. Yet in 1607, he criticized Jonson for being too pedantic to make allowances for his audience or the needs of aesthetics.

Outside of these tensions, Marston's career continued to prosper. In 1603, he became a shareholder in the Children of Blackfriars company, at that time known for steadily pushing the allowable limits of personal satire, violence, and lewdness on stage. He wrote and produced two plays with the company. The first

was *The Malcontent* in 1603; this satiric tragicomedy is Marston's most famous play. This work was originally written for the children at Blackfriars, and was later taken over (perhaps stolen) by the Kings' Men at the Globe, with additions by John Webster and (perhaps) Marston himself.

Marston's second play for the Blackfriars children was *The Dutch Courtesan*, a satire on lust and hypocrisy, in 1604-5. In 1605, he worked with George Chapman and Ben Jonson on *Eastward Ho*, a satire of popular taste and the vain imaginings of wealth to be found in Virginia. Chapman and Jonson were arrested for, according to Jonson, a few clauses that offended the Scots, but Marston escaped any imprisonment. The actual cause of arrest and details of the brief detainment are not certainly known; in the event, charges were dropped. Also in 1605, he married a woman named Mary, who was probably daughter of William Wilkes, one of King James's chaplains.

In 1606, Marston seems to have offended and then soothed King James. First, in *Parasitaster*, or, *The Fawn*, he satirized the king specifically. However, in the summer of that year, he put on a production of *The Dutch Courtesan* for the King of Denmark's visit, with a Latin verse on King James that was presented by hand to the king. Finally, in 1607, he wrote *The Entertainment at Ashby*, a masque for the Earl of Huntingdon. At that point, he stopped his dramatic career altogether, selling his shares in the company of Blackfriars. His departure from the literary scene may have been because of another play, now lost, which offended the king.

He moved into his father-in-law's house and began studying philosophy. In 1609, he became a reader at the Bodleian library at Oxford, was made a deacon on 24 September and a priest on 24 December 1609. Contemporary authors were bemused or surprised by Marston's change of career, with several of them commenting on its seeming abruptness. In October 1616, Marston was assigned the living of Christchurch, Hampshire. He died on 24 June 1634 in London and was buried in the Middle Temple Church.

### <b>Reception and Criticism</b>

Marston's reputation has varied widely, like that of most of the minor Renaissance dramatists. Both *The Malcontent* and *The Dutch Courtesan* remained on stage in altered forms through the Restoration. The subplot of the latter was converted to a droll during the Commonwealth; after the Stuart Restoration, either Aphra Behn or Thomas Betterton updated the main plot for *The Revenge*, or *The Match in Newgate*, although this adaptation makes the play both more sentimental and less morally complex. Gerard Langbaine makes a laudatory but

superficial comment about Marston in his survey of English dramatic poets.

After the Restoration, Marston's works were largely reduced to the status of a curiosity of literary history. The general resemblance of *The Malcontent* to *Hamlet* and Marston's role in the war of the poets ensured that his plays would receive some scholarly attention, but they were not performed and were not even widely read. Thomas Warton preferred Marston's satires to Bishop Hall's; in the next century, however, Henry Hallam reversed this judgment. William Gifford, perhaps the eighteenth century's most devoted reader of Jonson, called Marston "the most scurrilous, filthy and obscene writer of his time."

The Romantic movement in English literature resuscitated Marston's reputation, albeit unevenly. In his lectures, William Hazlitt praised Marston's genius for satire; however, if the romantic critics and their successors were willing to grant Marston's best work a place among the great accomplishments of the period, they remained aware of his inconsistency, what Swinburne in a later generation called his "uneven and irregular demesne."

In the twentieth century, however, a few critics were willing to consider Marston as a writer who was very much in control of the world he creates. [T. S. Eliot](http://www.poemhunter.com/thomas-stearns-eliot/) saw that this "irregular demesne" was a part of Marston's world and declared him "among the writers of genius" (*Elizabethan Dramatists*). Marston's tragic style is Senecan and although his characters may appear, on Eliot's own admission, "lifeless", they are instead used as types to convey their "theoretical implications". Eliot in particular admired *Sophonisba* and saw how Marston's plays, with their apparently stylised characters and bitter portrayal of a world where virtue and honour only arouse "dangerous envy" in those around them, actually bring to life "the kind of pattern which we perceive in our own lives only at rare moments of inattention and detachment".

# Delicious Beauty That Doth Lie

DELICIOUS Beauty, that doth lie  
Wrapped in a skin of ivory,  
Lie still, lie still upon thy back,  
And, Fancy, let no sweet dreams lack  
To tickle her, to tickle her with pleasing thoughts.

But if thy eyes are open full,  
Then deign to view an honest gull  
That stands, that stands expecting still  
When that thy casement open will;  
And bless his eyes, and bless his eyes with one kind glance.

John Marston

## If Love Be Holy, If That Mystery

If love be holy, if that mystery  
O co-united hearts be sacrament;  
If the unbounded goodness have infused  
A sacred ardour of a mutual love  
Into our species; if those amorous joys,  
Those sweets of life, those comforts even in death,  
Spring from a cause above our reason's reach;  
If that clear flame deduce its heat from heaven,  
'Tis, like its cause, eternal; always one,  
As in th' instiller of divinest love,  
Unchanged by time, immortal, maugre death.  
But, oh! 'tis grown a figment; love, a jest:  
A comic poesy: the soul of man is rotten,  
Even to the core, no sound affection.  
Our love is hollow, vaulted, stands on props  
Of circumstance, profit, or ambitious passes.

John Marston

# O Love, How Strangely Sweet

O LOVE, how strangely sweet  
Are thy weak passions,  
That Love and Joy should meet  
In self-same fashions!  
Oh, who can tell  
The cause why this should move?  
But only this:  
No reason ask of Love.

John Marston



# The Nut-Brown Ale

THE nut-brown ale, the nut-brown ale,  
Puts down all drink when it is stale!  
The toast, the nutmeg, and the ginger  
Will make a sighing man a singer.  
Ale gives a buffet in the head,  
But ginger under-props the brain;  
When ale would strike a strong man dead  
Then nutmeg tempers it again.  
The nut-brown ale, the nut-brown ale,  
Puts down all drink when it is stale!

John Marston

# The Scourge Of Villainy

In serious jest, and jesting seriousness,  
I strive to scourge polluting beastliness;  
I invoke no Delian deity,  
No sacred offspring of Mnemosyne;  
I pray in aid of no Castalian Muse,  
No nymph, no female angel, to infuse  
A sprightly wit to raise my flagging wings,  
And teach me tune these harsh discordant strings.  
I crave no sirens of our halcyon times,  
To grace the accents of my rough-hew'd rhymes;  
But grim Reproof, stern Hate of Villainy,  
Inspire and guide a Satire's poesy.  
Fair Detestation of foul odious sin,  
In which our swinish times lie wallowing,  
Be thou my conduct and my Genius,  
My wits-inciting sweet-breath'd Zephyrus.  
O that a Satire's hand had force to pluck  
Some floodgate up, to purge the world from muck!  
Would God I could turn Alpheus river in,  
To purge this Augean oxstall from foul sin!  
Well, I will try; awake, Impurity,  
And view the veil drawn from thy villainy!

John Marston

# To Everlasting Oblivion

THOU mighty gulf, insatiate cormorant,  
Deride me not, though I seem petulant  
To fall into thy chops. Let others pray  
Forever their fair poems flourish may.  
But as for me, hungry Oblivion,  
Devour me quick. Accept my orison,  
My earnest prayers which do importune thee,  
With gloomy shade of thy still empery  
To veil both me and my rude poesy.  
Far worthier lines in silence of thy state  
Do sleep securely, free from love or hate,  
From which this, living, ne'er can be exempt,  
But whilst it breathes will hate and fury tempt.  
Then close his eyes with thy all-dimming hand  
Which not right glorious actions can withstand.  
Peace, hateful tongues! I now in silence pace  
Unless some hound do wake me from my place.  
I with this sharp yet well-meant poesy  
Will sleep secure, right free from injury  
Of canker'd hate or rankest villany.

John Marston