

## Shakespeare's "Purge" of Jonson, Once Again

by

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The famous literary war occupying the London stage from 1599 to 1601 was a feud, principally, between Marston and Jonson, although eventually some of their associates were drawn into the quarrel, among them Shakespeare, whose rôle in the affair remains a puzzle. There is a well known reference to him in 2 *Return from Parnassus*, performed at Cambridge during the Christmas season, 1601/2, which seems to connect him with these events.<sup>1</sup> Replete with allusions to the contemporary book trade, London theatrical activities, and prominent literary figures, this drama contains an interesting dialogue between two characters named Burbage and Kemp, the passage responsible for much speculation as to Shakespeare's involvement in the so-called War of the Theatres. Interest focuses upon the following speech uttered by Kemp:

Few of the vniversity [men] pen plaies well, they smell too much of that writer *Ouid*, and that writer *Metamorphosis*, and talke too much of *Proserpina & Iuppiter*. Why heres our fellow *Shakespeare* puts them all downe, I and *Ben Ionson* too. O that *Ben Ionson* is a pestilent fellow, he brought vp Horacc giuing the Poets a pill, but our fellow *Shakespeare* hath giuen him a purge that made him beray his credit.

(2 *Return from Parnassus*, IV.iii)

The reference to Horace is to the Horace-Jonson of *Poetaster* (1601), who gives the offending poets a pill to purge them of their abuses. The reference to Shakespeare, although exceedingly ambiguous, is responsible for a relentless search for the drama or dramas in which the "purge" of Jonson may have occurred.

There are three Parnassus plays, *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus* and 1 & 2 *Return from Parnassus*, which exploit the adventures of two scholars, Philomusus and Studioso, who in *The Pilgrimage* set out for Parnassus (Cambridge) and, by the end of the play, arrive at the foot of Parnassus Hill.<sup>2</sup> This first play in the series contains references to London book-sellers, brothels, and theatres, all of which emphasize the author's interest in and knowledge of the city. Furthermore, it lampoons Kemp, the famous clown and Shakespeare's fellow player, but scholars have found no direct

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<sup>1</sup>J. B. Leishman (ed.), *The Three Parnassus Plays: 1598-1601*, p. 26. The authorship of the Parnassus plays has not been ascertained. Leishman thinks there may have been more than one author: "I think . . . that the *First Returne* was not written by the author of the *Pilgrimage*, and secondly . . . what, though probably, seems to me less certain, . . . that the *Second Returne* was written by the author of the *First Returne*;" *ibid.*, p. 27. Performance dates for these plays, according to Leishman, are the following: 1598/9, *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus*; 1599-1600, 1 *Return from Parnassus*; 1601/2, the first performance of 2 *Return from Parnassus*; 1602/3, the second performance of 2 *Return from Parnassus*, p. 26. See also, Marjorie L. Reyburn, "New Facts and Theories about the Parnassus Plays," *PMLA*, LXXIV (September, 1959), 325-335.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 80.

allusions to Shakespeare in the text. *1 Return from Parnassus*, however, a continuation of the narrative of the two scholars who now depart from Parnassus on a journey to London and eventually to Rome or Rheims, demonstrates its author's acquaintance with Jonson's early work in the theatre and unmistakably alludes to Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Marston's *Scourge of Villainy*, Weever's *Epigrammes*, Hall's *Satires*, Lodge's *A Fig for Momus*, the Harvey-Nashe-Greene quarrel, and the Martin Marprelate controversy.<sup>3</sup> In addition, it treats satirically Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, referring to "Sweet Mr Shakespeare."<sup>4</sup> Less concerned with the experiences of the two scholars but intently focused upon contemporary London is *2 Return from Parnassus*, containing three allusions to the theatre, first in a scene in which Studioso laments the state of "vnhappy Schollers" who must grovel while "mimick apes" (actors) enjoy royal treatment; second, in a scene in which Marston, Jonson, and Shakespeare, along with other poets, are censured individually for excesses and shortcomings; and third, in the earlier mentioned dialogue between Burbage and Kemp, which scholars have cited for its evidence of Shakespeare's connection with the famous stage quarrel.

Of the several theories related to the subject of the "purge," perhaps the three most interesting are the following: (1) the "purge" occurs in Dekker's *Satiromastix*; (2) it occurs in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*; and (3) it may have occurred in an early text of *Hamlet*. Leishman, editor of the Parnassus plays, favors *Satiromastix*, a Globe play belonging to the Chamberlain's Men, for its comic sub-plot which is clearly satiric of Jonson,<sup>5</sup> a view supported by Penniman<sup>6</sup> and Chambers, the latter stating:

The purge ought to be in *Satiromastix*, and though there is nothing to indicate that Shakespeare had any responsibility for *Satiromastix*, it is just conceivable that a Cambridge man, writing before the play was assigned to Dekker in print, may have thought that he had.<sup>7</sup>

It is true that Dekker, at this time, was not well known. At least his name is conspicuously absent from the title pages of his two plays, *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1599) and *The Comedy of Old Fortunatus* (1599), both of which precede *Satiromastix* in print.<sup>8</sup> Leishman also believes that Elizabethans may have looked upon the Globe and the Chamberlain's Men as Shakespeare's house and company, making Shakespeare, in the broadest sense, responsible for the activities at the Globe.<sup>9</sup> At any rate, the three Parnassus plays do not mention Dekker by name; whereas, they do allude variously to Marston, Jonson, and Shakespeare.

<sup>3</sup>See the author's unpublished master's thesis for a detailed analysis of these allusions, pp. 82-86.

<sup>4</sup>"O sweet Mr Shakespeare, Ile have his picture in my study at the courte" (IV.i.1031-1032); "Ile worshipp sweet Mr Shakespeare, and to honoure him will lay his *Venus and Adonis* vnder my pillowe" (IV.i.1199-1203).

<sup>5</sup>Leishman, *op. cit.*, pp. 59; 369-70.

<sup>6</sup>Josiah H. Penniman, "The War of the Theatres," *Publications of the University of Pennsylvania Series in Philology, Literature, and Archaeology*, IV (1897), 149.

<sup>7</sup>Sir E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, IV, 40.

<sup>8</sup>Fredson Bowers (ed.), *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, I, 9; 105. Cf. Mary Leland Hunt, *Thomas Dekker: A Study*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>9</sup>Leishman, *op. cit.*, 370.

The second theory (the "purge" in *Troilus and Cressida*) originated with Fleay in 1886, when he matched Jonson with Ajax, Dekker with Thersites, Chapman with Achilles, and Shakespeare with Hector.<sup>10</sup> Later, he reiterated his view of Jonson in the first volume of *A Biographical Chronicle of the English Drama* (1891), only to alter his opinion in the second volume, as follows:

My hypothesis is that the "physic" given to "the great Myrmidon," i.3,378; iii.3,34, is identical with the "purge" administered by Shakespeare to Jonson in *The Return from Parnassus*, iv.3, and that the setting up of Ajax as a rival to Achilles shadows forth the putting forward of Dekker by the King's men to write against Jonson his *Satiromastix*.<sup>11</sup>

Thereafter, Fleay remained convinced that Dekker was Ajax, Jonson was Achilles, and Thersites was Marston. In 1899, Small argued that Fleay's initial identification of Jonson with Ajax was probably correct.<sup>12</sup> In 1915, Tatlock, noting that personal satire often intruded into Jonson's works, concluded that Ajax was a caricature of Jonson.<sup>13</sup> In 1938, Campbell, in support of Tatlock, claimed that certain traits attributed to Ajax by other characters in Shakespeare's play were those frequently ascribed to Jonson by enemies. He cautioned, however, that Ajax's dominant trait of heavy stupidity was a characteristic which no one could accuse Jonson of possessing.<sup>14</sup> In 1948, discussing the motives which Shakespeare may have had for satirizing Jonson, Elton noted the passages in *Troilus and Cressida* which appear to reflect Jonson's known traits, concluding

. . . that both external and internal evidence point to identification of Ajax as Jonson. Shakespeare "purged" Jonson by satirizing him as a witless braggart soldier compounded of humours, and berayed his credit (befouled his reputation) by naming him Ajax, signifying a privy.<sup>15</sup>

In their edition of Jonson's works, Herford and Simpson argue that it ". . . is probable. . . that this 'purge' was given in *Troilus and Cressida*."<sup>16</sup> Craig suggests that Shakespeare's play may have been a ". . . rewriting to remove the controversy connected with the War of the Theatres."<sup>17</sup> Certainly, in Shakespeare's prologue, the lines, "And hither am I come, / A Prologue arm'd, but not in confidence / Of Authors pen or Actors voice," seem to be a reply to a comment in the prologue to *Poetaster* in which Jonson boasts that his play transcends the criticism of ". . . that common spawne of ignorance / Our frie of

<sup>10</sup>F. G. Fleay, *A Chronicle History of the Life and Work of William Shakespeare, the Player, Poet, and Playmaker*, pp. 45: 188.

<sup>11</sup>F. G. Fleay, *A Biographical Chronicle of the English Drama*, II, 189.

<sup>12</sup>Roscoe Addison Small, *The Stage-Quarrel between Ben Jonson and the So-Called Poetasters*, pp. 168-169.

<sup>13</sup>J. S. P. Tatlock, "The Seige of Troy in Elizabethan Literature," *PMLA*, XXX (1915), 727-734.

<sup>14</sup>Oscar J. Campbell, *Comicall Satyre and Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida*, p. 219.

<sup>15</sup>William Elton, "Shakespeare's Portrait of Ajax in *Troilus and Cressida*," *PMLA*, LXIII (June, 1948), 748; see also, W. W. Lawrence, "Troilus, Cressida, and Thersites," *MLR*, XXXVII (October, 1942), 429.

<sup>16</sup>C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson (eds.), *Ben Jonson*, I, fn. 28.

<sup>17</sup>Hardin Craig, *A New Look at Shakespeare's Quartos*, pp. 26-37; also his *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, p. 862.

writers." There is also the possibility that *Histrionastix* (1599) contains an allusion to *Troilus and Cressida* in the oft-quoted passage:

Come Cressida, my Cresset light,  
Thy face doth shine both day and night,  
Behold, behold, thy garter blue  
Thy knight his valiant elboe wears,  
That when he shakes his furious Speare,  
The foe in shivering fearfull sort,  
May lay him downe in death to snort.

(II.i)

Here, one confronts the problem of assigning a date as early as 1599 to Shakespeare's play.<sup>18</sup> Whether the entire passage belongs to Marston's revision of *Histrionastix* or to the original text of the play is also uncertain, although Small, on the basis of a textual study, believes the passage to be a part of Marston's revision.<sup>19</sup> Finally, Chambers has interpreted Marston's play as a satire on the professional actors, performed in revival by amateurs or boys.<sup>20</sup>

The third theory concerned with the "purge" involves *Hamlet*, centering mainly around the famous commentary upon acting and child actors. While scholars have never agreed upon a date for the initial performance of this play, they have, nevertheless, assigned it to the period of 1598-1601.<sup>21</sup> As is well known, the texts of Q<sub>1</sub> (1603), Q<sub>2</sub> (1604), and F<sub>1</sub> are at variance, Q<sub>1</sub> being shorter than Q<sub>2</sub>, which, in turn, is some two hundred lines longer than F<sub>1</sub>, the two latter versions having textual authority.<sup>22</sup> A parallel study of these texts reveals that the F<sub>1</sub> extended reference to child actors and travelling players, since it does nothing to further the movement of the narrative, may be an intentional commentary upon London theatrical conditions. Records show that two companies of children were actively performing in London at the turn of the century.<sup>23</sup> Paul's Boys had reopened in the winter of 1599, and the Children of the Chapel had occupied their new quarters in 1600.<sup>24</sup> Aware of the competition which they faced, they engaged the services of a number of new dramatists, self-made scholars like Jonson, and university men like Marston, who were antagonistic to the public theatre and resentful of their treatment by professional actors.<sup>25</sup> Jonson had begun his career in the service of a professional acting company, as had Marston, who is first mentioned by Henslowe in an entry in the diary for September 28, 1599.<sup>26</sup> Soon afterwards, he is in the employ of Paul's Boys, revising the anonymous *Histrionastix*, a biting satire on professional players.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Chambers, *op. cit.*, IV, 19.

<sup>19</sup>Small, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

<sup>20</sup>Chambers, *op. cit.*, IV, 19.

<sup>21</sup>Craig, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, p. 900. See also, Edward Arber (ed.), *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London; 1554-1640 A. D.*, III, 84b. Scholars have also noted a reference to *Hamlet* in Gabriel Harvey's *Marginalia*, possibly recorded between 1598-1601.

<sup>22</sup>Craig, *A New Look at Shakespeare's Quartos*, pp. 77-80.

<sup>23</sup>C. F. Tucker Brooke, *The Tudor Drama: A History of English Drama to the Retirement of Shakespeare*, pp. 385-386.

<sup>24</sup>Harold N. Hillebrand, *The Child Actors*, p. 211.

<sup>25</sup>Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

<sup>26</sup>R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert (eds.), *Henslowe's Diary*, p. 125; see also, A. H. Bullen (ed.), *The Works of John Marston*, I, xxiv; Chambers, *op. cit.*, III, 428.

<sup>27</sup>Small, *op. cit.*, p. 67; Chambers, *op. cit.*, IV, 17-18; *CHEL*, VI, 45.

Jonson's first play for the Children of the Chapel at Blackfriars was *Cynthia's Revels* (1600), followed by *Poetaster* (1601), his notorious attack upon the Chamberlain's Men, his former associates.<sup>28</sup> Hence, it is possible that the twenty-line "little Yases" passage in F<sub>1</sub> is missing from the texts of Q<sub>1</sub> and Q<sub>2</sub> for editorial reasons, since Jonson was, by 1603, once more associated with the Chamberlain's Men, and since the War of the Theatres had ended by this time. Under these circumstances, one doubts very much that the company would have risked opening old wounds, assuming, of course, that the "little Yases" passage originally had been a part of the manuscripts which furnished the texts of Q<sub>1</sub> and Q<sub>2</sub>.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the three *Hamlet* texts contain different replies to Hamlet's question concerning travelling players. In Q<sub>1</sub>, he is told that the players travel because of the *noueltie* of private plays which have attracted the public. In Q<sub>2</sub>, he learns that their travel is the result of a players' *Inhibition* brought on by the late *Innouasion*. In F<sub>1</sub>, he is given these replies in combination, *innouasion* in juxtaposition with *noueltie* taking on a similar connotation. Some have concluded that these replies reflect the problems created by the revival of the child acting companies in 1599-1600, which may have compelled some professional actors, or companies, to resort to tours.<sup>30</sup> They refer to Jonson's *Poetaster*, citing a speech in which an actor says, ". . . this winter has made us all poorer than so many staru'd snakes: nobody comes at us, not a gentleman" (III.iv). And they call attention to Jonson's implication that the children's companies offered better theatrical fare and thereby attracted larger audiences. However, it is necessary to consider other matters of possible influence, here, the first being that the Globe, an outdoor playhouse, did not perform during the cold winter months; the second being that Jonson's player qualifies his statement, "nobody comes at us," with the highly significant phrase, "not a gentleman." There is no evidence to show that the War of the Theatres led to a general inhibition of acting, although it is clear that the children sorely irritated the professional players. Even so, there is no evidence to indicate that Shakespeare's company suffered any reversals because of this rivalry. Furthermore, one finds it difficult to believe that Shakespeare would have openly admitted that these children had forced his own company to travel. Indeed, the Privy Council ordinance of 1597 had done much to eliminate competition by restricting the number of licensed acting groups to two—the Chamberlain's Men and the Admiral's.<sup>31</sup> In fact, it was not until 1602 that a third company, Worcester's Men, was granted a similar license by the Queen.<sup>32</sup> Harbage has shown that the combined capacity of the public houses, performing daily, was probably six times

<sup>28</sup>Herford and Simpson, *op. cit.*, I, 168.

<sup>29</sup>Brooke, *op. cit.*, p. 386.

<sup>30</sup>Hillebrand, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>31</sup>Chambers, *op. cit.*, II, 366; the former had played at the Curtain, near Shoreditch, until 1599, when the company tore down that theatre and built the Globe across the Thames (*ibid.*, II, 403); the latter had played at the Rose until 1600, at which time they moved to the newly erected Fortune (*ibid.*, II, 409).

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, II, 225.

as great as the capacity of the two private houses, performing weekly.<sup>33</sup> For these reasons, one doubts that the reported success of the child actors was great enough to have prompted tours of the provinces by professional actors. It is also interesting to recall that Burbage leased his Blackfriars property to Henry Evans on September 2, 1600, fully aware of Evans' intentions of establishing a company of boy actors at this house.<sup>34</sup> One remembers, as well, that the attitude of the Burbage-Kemp characters in the previously mentioned dialogue of *2 Return from Parnassus* is smug and superior, implying that the well informed author of the play, who exclaimed against the wealth of players and lamented the poverty of scholars, would have welcomed an opportunity to remind his audience of an economic crisis in the London theatre had one actually existed.

In spite of a Privy Council order of 1578 which forbade open shows and large assemblies within five miles of Cambridge, scholars think that a version of *Hamlet* may have been performed in that town.<sup>35</sup> However, there are no records to indicate that the Chamberlain's Men travelled in 1601.<sup>36</sup> The only recorded visit of this company to Cambridge is the one of 1594/5.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, it is observed that the title-page of the 1603 Q<sub>1</sub> of *Hamlet* states that this play had been acted in the two "Vniversities of Cambridge and Oxford." Craig believes that Q<sub>1</sub> was printed from a prompt copy which had been used by a company of touring players who possibly performed at both universities, the prompt copy having fallen into the hands of the printer when the group returned to London.<sup>38</sup> Thus, he explains the degenerate state of Q<sub>1</sub> as the result of a continual deterioration of the text on the road, the company being smaller than the London group and the actors of poorer quality.<sup>39</sup> However, the Burbage-Kemp dialogue of *2 Return from Parnassus* implies that well known actors made up the company that is reported to have performed at Cambridge. It is almost certain that Burbage and Kemp accompanied the Chamberlain's Men to Cambridge in 1594/5 and, possibly, again in 1601.<sup>40</sup> One thinks that the portrayal of Kemp by the Parnassus poet is too much involved with the details of a Cambridge visit and the account of a performance of a university play to be lightly dismissed as a poet's fancy.

A royal patent of May 17, 1603, which Polonius strangely appears to parody in *Hamlet*, expressly permits the Chamberlain's Men, now called the King's Men, to act at the Globe and ". . . w<sup>l</sup>'th<sup>in</sup> the liberties and freedome of any other Cittie Vniversitie Towne or Borough what-

<sup>33</sup>Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions*, p. 47: ". . . it appears likely that in the year of *Hamlet* eighteen to twenty-four thousand spectators a week through nine or ten months of the year were patronizing the Chamberlain's Men at the Globe, the Admiral's Men at the Fortune, and Worcester's Men at the Boar's Head or Rose, compared with six or seven hundred spectators a week through six months of the year patronizing the Chapel boys at Blackfriars and Paul's boys at their song school."

<sup>34</sup>Chambers, *op. cit.*, II, 41-42.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, II, 100.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, II, 194. Chambers finds no records to show that the Chamberlain's Men travelled, except for brief periods of time in 1596, 1597, and possibly 1601. Nevertheless, Evelyn May Albright, *Dramatic Publications in England, 1580-1640*, p. 13, cautions that unrecorded dramatic performances in the provinces probably far outnumbered the recorded ones.

<sup>37</sup>Leishman, *op. cit.*, p. 336 fn.

<sup>38</sup>Craig, *A New Look at Shakespeare's Quartos*, p. 80.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>40</sup>Leishman, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

soeu[er] w[ithin] of ur[ said] Realmes and dominions."<sup>41</sup> In the play, Polonius also boasts that he once had acted the part of Julius Caesar at the university (III.ii.103-111). While it is foolhardy to search for the caricature of a university man in the character of Polonius, one thinks that Shakespeare's allusion to would-be actors in the universities contained in his treatment of Polonius would have had much significance for Cambridge men at this time.

It is also possible to consider the management of the Burbage-Kemp dialogue in 2 *Return from Parnassus* as the Parnassus poet's reaction to the famous advice to the players in *Hamlet*. In the Parnassus play, Burbage, generally conceded to have been the first interpreter of the Hamlet rôle, coaches Studioso in the proper rendering of a well-worn line from Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, "Who calls Ieronimo from his naked bedd?" and lines from *Richard III*, "Now is the winter of our discontent . . . ." On the other hand, Kemp, before concluding an interview with university students who desire to become actors, reminds his charges to heed his advice: "Thou wilt do well in time, if thou wilt be ruled by thy betters: that is, by my selfe, and such graue Aldermen of the playhouse as I am." The fact that in Shakespeare's play it is Hamlet, a university man, who advises the strolling players may indicate, from the point of view of Cambridge scholars, the right order of things. Since Burbage, like Edward Alleyn, had become a man of substantial wealth as a professional actor, it seems natural for the author of 2 *Return from Parnassus* to be as concerned as Greene and Nashe over the dependence of university-trained scholars upon base and ignorant—but *prosperous*—players. For these reasons, one thinks it likely that *Hamlet* had been performed at Cambridge prior to the time in which 2 *Return from Parnassus* had delighted audiences of university students with its sharp jabs at the players and playwrights of the London public theatres. And, if *Hamlet* were performed there *after* Jonson's *Poetaster* had been performed in London by the Children of the Chapel, it may very well have contained the long-sought-for "purge" of Jonson referred to in the Parnassus play.

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<sup>41</sup>Quoted in Benjamin R. Lewis (ed.), *The Shakespeare Documents*, II, 365.

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