JONSON, THE POETOMACHIA, AND THE REFORMATION OF RENAISSANCE SATIRE

PURGING SATIRE

Jay Simons
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Does satire have the ability to effect social reform? If so, what satiric style is most effective in bringing about reform? This book explores how Renaissance poet and playwright Ben Jonson negotiated contemporary pressures to forge a satiric persona and style uniquely his own. These pressures were especially intense while Jonson was engaged in the Poetomachia, or Poets’ War (1598–1601), which pitted him against rival writers John Marston and Thomas Dekker. As a struggle between satiric styles, this conflict poses compelling questions about the nature and potential of satire during the Renaissance. In particular, this book explores how Jonson forged a moderate Horatian satiric style he championed as capable of effective social reform. As part of his distinctive model, Jonson turned to the metaphor of purging, in opposition to the metaphors of stinging, barking, biting, and whipping employed by his Juvenalian rivals. By integrating this conception of satire into his Horatian poetics, Jonson sought to avoid the pitfalls of the aggressive, violent style of his rivals while still effectively critiquing vice, upholding his model as a means for the reformation not only of society, but of satire itself.

Jay Simons received his PhD in English, with a specialty in British Renaissance literature, from Southern Illinois University in 2013. The same year, his article entitled “Stinging, Barking, Biting, Purging: Jonson’s Bartholomew Fair and the Debate on Satire in the Poetomachia” was published in the Ben Jonson Journal. He is currently an Adjunct Professor at Jefferson Community & Technical College.
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Introduction
Jonson in the Age of Juvenal

Satire in the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods featured a chorus of voices, many of them in direct competition, few distinctive enough to stand out in a crowded and often undervalued field. Within this atmosphere of contention and this most contentious of genres, however, arose one of the great satirical writers of the Renaissance, Ben Jonson. Although he wrote in a variety of genres, it was his talent as a satirist that drove his greatest works and that would ultimately define his place in English letters. More so than any other writer of his age, he strove to elevate the status of satire as a respectable vehicle of social reformation. He was by no means the only individual to comment on the literary status and moral potential of satire, nor was his sanguine appraisal of it entirely unique. In an atmosphere of tumultuous literary debate exacerbated by the vogue for riotous satire, what made Jonson exceptional was his crafting of a restrained satiric style envisioned as a moderate purge capable of reforming not only society, but the field of satire itself.

Playing the Satyr

The profusion of satire in the late 1590s and early 1600s has been well-documented. Critics such as Alvin Kernan, Anne Lake Prescott, and Angela J. Wheeler all agree that the period was dominated by forceful Juvenalian satire. In his *Tudor Verse Satire*, K. W. Gransden likewise asserts that “Juvenal’s ‘savage indignation’ became the accepted pose of the English *fin-de-siècle* satirists,” and his selections for this collection of verse satire (including works by Marston, Joseph Hall, and Samuel Rowlands) reflect this Juvenalian bias. The roughness and obscenity of this manner was legitimated, many satirists believed, by a supposed etymological link between “satire” and the “satyr” of Greek satyr plays (reflected in the common early modern spelling of satire as “satyre”). As Kernan puts it in *The Cankered Muse*,

since satire was thought of as being spoken by rough, crude, wanton satyrs, it followed that the style and matter should be appropriate to these creatures ... [which] seems to have meant harsh meters, coarse language, and frank descriptions of ... vice.
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William Rankins boldly announces his belief, and investment, in the logic of this connection in his *Seven Satyres* (1598): “I am a Satyre, savage is my sport.” This conception became so entrenched that even after Isaac Casaubon in 1605 correctly traced the origin of “satire” to the Latin “satura,” a word suggesting fullness and variety, satirists continued to rely on the spurious etymology to justify their harshness and obscenity. Although most evident in verse satire, this phenomenon was by no means confined to this genre, as will become clear in my discussions of plays by Jonson, Marston, and Dekker.

All this satiric violence did not go unnoticed by the authorities, and in 1599 the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London issued a ban on satire and called in several of the more offensive and exuberant recent epigrams and formal verse satires, including the satiric verses of Hall and Marston. The precise nature of the fears that provoked the issuance of the ban and what it was intended to accomplish are not entirely clear. Or were they making a calculated political move, jumping at the opportunity to make this loud, relentless literary mode a scapegoat for society’s ills? Had satire truly become a (negative) social force to be reckoned with? While some scholars believe the authorities were simply trying to suppress obscene material, it is apparent that the ban was aimed specifically at satire. Richard A. McCabe convincingly argues this view, noting the predominance of formal verse satires (which comprise the first five works mentioned) in the declaration and the fact that the bishops almost certainly would have been acting in conjunction with the secular government, making a clerical focus on obscenity unlikely. The increasing popularity of satire among young intellectuals, and its increasingly violent nature, constituted a rhetorical unruliness that could have been seen as prefiguring actual violence and civil unrest. The authorities, recognizing this potential threat, reacted by attempting to curb it.

The ban, however, did not derail the satiric enterprise, as “poets continued to bark and cavort in print.” Some of these poets may have been taking advantage of the ban’s unintended consequence of advertising the enticingly illicit and dangerous nature of satire, making it more attractive for many readers. Jonson was not directly affected but, according to Oscar James Campbell, he and Marston responded by diverting their satiric impulse into drama in order to circumvent the ban, which was directed toward formal verse satire. Although he would go on to adapt some of the conventions of verse satire, and a few verse satires themselves, to dramatic purposes, the theory that Jonson began protecting himself at this time by channeling his satire into drama seems unlikely, as he had already begun writing satiric comedies with *Every Man In His Humour* the year before. Moreover, the kind of satire that alarmed public officials was the very kind that Jonson had begun to eschew as inimical to his satiric program. Although the ban did not name
a specific kind of satire to be outlawed, it was clearly directed toward the raw, violent tenor of what we would now call Juvenalian satire. If the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London saw this satire as morally dangerous, they were on the same page as Jonson, who was just beginning to publicly reject it. He strongly believed in the power of satire, which, though capable of being used to harm society, could also be used to heal it.

**Juvenal, Horace, and “the Stoickes Patience”**

Although he never used the term, Jonson’s disapproval of much contemporary satire was a function of its Juvenalianism. The designation of satire as either Juvenalian or Horatian, long a commonplace in satiric theory, is based on differences that were recognized during the Renaissance. A famous formulation of these differences is found in J. C. Scaliger’s *Poetices libri septem* (1561): “Iuvenalis ardet … Persius insultat. Horatius irridet” (“Juvenal burns, Persius taunts, and Horace smiles”). Although Persius, who lived after Horace and before Juvenal, was sometimes regarded as a satiric model, he tended to be likened to Juvenal on the basis of his harshness and obscurity, and considered less important than the other two. Scaliger groups Juvenal and Persius together and opposes their style to that of Horace, but ultimately endorses the fervor of Juvenal alone. Thus, the primary distinction was between the sharp, indignant censure practiced by Juvenal and the good-natured, genial criticism of Horace. Juvenal has a declamatory style, based in part on rhetorical practice and, by his own account, propelled by the vice pervasive in society. Horace, on the other hand, invites us to laugh along with him at his observation of the faults of humankind. These distinctions are by no means absolute, but they became more and more useful in classifying satirists and their work between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, and have been indelibly etched into the critical discussion of satire.

The definitions remain essentially the same, but there is an important difference between modern and Renaissance ideas about Horatian and Juvenalian satire: while we tend to accept both as valid approaches to the censuring of vice and folly, Renaissance writers felt compelled to champion one or the other as the only appropriate, effective satiric style. This was in large part due to the misunderstanding of the lineage of satire, which suggested that it should possess certain characteristics. As a genre believed to have its origins in the Greek satyr plays, harshness and scurrility were requisite. Inevitably, Horace could not easily be accommodated to these conceptions, and so Juvenal held his place as the favored satiric model of the Renaissance. Of course, not all writers’ practice and/or understanding of satire was grounded in a strict genealogical conception of its nature, and not all favored Juvenal. For example, John Donne’s satires, written in the early 1590s, draw on all
three major Roman satirists, being most indebted to Horace. Daniel Heinsius, who published an edition of Horace’s satires in 1612, identified Horace’s laughing manner as proper to satire. Jonson took this a step further when he explicitly took on the identity of a Horatian satirist in defiance of the prevailing Juvenalian atmosphere, recognizing in the milder satirist what he considered to be a more effectual approach to reform.

Jonson’s adoption of a Horatian model helped bring the differences between Horace and Juvenal into relief and amplified the urgency of the debate. He may not have been the only follower of Horace, but he was the most deliberate and self-aware Horatian of his age. The extent to which he identified himself with the Roman satirist, culminating in his use of the historical Horace as protagonist and satiric avatar in *Poetaster*, was unprecedented, attracting a lot of attention, especially in the form of criticism from his Juvenalian rivals. Jonson’s choice looks forward to the Augustans, many of whom would prefer the polish and urbanity of Horace, who was, after all, the premier satirist of Augustan Rome. During the Augustan age, the Horace vs. Juvenal controversy became more codified, in part due to Dryden’s popularization of the scheme that aligned Horatian and Juvenalian satire with comedy and tragedy, respectively. This association was designed to garner some of drama’s respectability for satire, which was considered low in the hierarchy of genres. While this particular facet of the debate was not as well-defined in Jonson’s time, his adaptation of Horace’s satiric poetics to the stage in his comedies anticipated this connection as it would be elaborated a century later. However, it was not only through drama that Jonson sought to derive moral authority for his satire but also through satire’s own ability to effect social reformation in both drama and verse. As a satirist who tended to avoid the stylistic traits that contributed to the popular conception of satire as unclean and unruly, Horace was the *sine qua non* of Jonson’s satiric self-presentation.

Jonson’s devotion to Horace’s poetics earned him a reputation as the “English Horace,” an image he deliberately cultivated. His identification with the Roman satirist, culminating in the adoption of a similar satiric program, begins with biographical parallels. Horace, the son of a freed slave, eventually came to the attention of Augustus; Jonson, brought up in his stepfather’s trade of bricklaying, likewise overcame his humble origins to enjoy fame and royal favor. Both received an education somewhat above their station, and both served in the army for a brief time. Jonson, familiar with a wide range of classical writers, may have been encouraged by these similarities to foster a close literary identification with Horace. In *Discoveries*, he commends Horace’s judgment, calling him “the best master, both of vertue, and wisdome,” suggesting his admiration for the moralistic qualities of Horace as satirist. In fact, Jonson was most strongly influenced by the Horace of the
Satires, whose persona he tailored to his own dramatic purposes. As Edward Gieskes avers, in the late 1590s Jonson “was coming to align himself with the legacy of Horatian satire” with his satiric comedies. In particular, the restraint and mildness of Horace’s satiric enterprise appealed to Jonson, whose “unruly nature,” by some accounts, needed this kind of restraint. Had he taken Juvenal as a model, he would have had no problem channeling and indulging this unruliness in his satire. In following Horace, he resists the urge to succumb to violence and inclines instead to Horatian good humor. Jonson’s decision to adopt a Horatian model, crucial to his satiric program, effectively put him at odds with most of the writers of his time, against whom he wished to define his own satiric voice.

An important part of Jonson’s understanding of Horace was the Stoicism that could be discerned in Horace’s writings. Satire may seem incompatible with the tenets of this philosophy, but in fact, as James P. Bednarz writes, “Elizabethans did not automatically isolate Stoic fortitude from the function of moral censure.” One of the reasons for this may be that the “Popular exposition of ethical doctrine by preaching was particularly associated with the Stoics,” according to Roland Mayer, who goes on to observe that “it is Horace who undeniably owes most to [this] manner.” Beyond this practical aspect, Horace did not patent espouse Stoicism, or any other philosophy, on a systematic basis, although identifiable strains of Epicureanism and Stoicism exist in his poetry. Jonson, however, had a tendency to seize on the Stoic elements in the classical authors he read, and this was especially true in regards to his appropriation of Horace.

In Satires 2.7, Horace describes the Stoic sage, “who is lord over himself, whom neither poverty nor death nor bonds affright, who bravely defies his passions” (“sibi qui imperiosus, quem neque pauperies neque mors neque vincula terrent, responsare cupidinibus”), as the only free man. This portrait of the Stoic wise man as “centered in himself[,] and resistant to the hostility of the masses,” Burrow writes, “repeatedly informs Jonson’s self-presentation.” This is a pose that Jonson frequently adopts also in response to other writers’ attacks. If he interpreted these words as a definitive description of Horace’s own philosophical position, however, he did so without regard for the potential intricacies of this satire. Charles Martindale observes that his conception of Horace as “a serious writer on ethical themes … may have led Jonson to miss the occasional irony,” and the apparent endorsement of Stoicism in Satires 2.7 is a potential case in point. The Stoic ideal is described by Davus, a slave, who heard it from another slave who had also overheard it, the result being “third-hand lessons of stoicism.” Davus uses it against Horace (who is a character in the dialogue) as a contrast to what he sees as Horace’s less than admirable character and behavior. These circumstances have led many critics to see this portrait of the
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Stoic sage as “an ironic send up” or parody, and the Stoic sermon in Satires 2.3, the companion piece to 2.7, has come under similar scrutiny. H. Rushton Fairclough believes that in Satires 2.7 we should “regard the slave Davus, the preacher of wisdom, as the Horace of real life,” and it is likely that many Renaissance readers, including Jonson, associated this wisdom with Horace himself.

However, while Jonson appears to have taken Davus’s words as consonant with Horace’s philosophy, he also appreciated the subtleties of a satire in which the author uses his own apparent ideal against himself. Although he prizes self-restraint and frequently writes against those who fail to practice it, Jonson sees fit to engage in mild self-deprecation of his own lapses. For example, in Every Man Out of His Humour, a character describes the play’s author as a man with a fondness for food and drink, who often “makes a good meal among players” (Prologue, 319–20), an obvious allusion to Jonson himself. Like Horace, Jonson softens the severity of Stoicism, folding it into a less strict system of values that allows for minor faults and the open acknowledgment of them. For these two satirists, moral authority does not derive from the strict observance of a particular code, but from experience and knowledge of the world’s ills and how to defy them.

Other Elizabethan satirists may have espoused certain tenets of Stoicism, but for the most part eschewed its restraint and composure. Marston, at times eager to associate himself with the philosophy, nonetheless explicitly rejects it in favor of Juvenalian fury in his collection of verse satire The Scourge of Villanie (1598) with the angry directive, “Preach not the Stoickes patience to me.” As attractive as Stoicism may have been to many Elizabethan writers, it was simply not compatible with Juvenalian satire. As mentioned, most satirists at this time valued the qualities of Juvenal over those found in Horace. Writers like Marston, Joseph Hall, Thomas Nashe, and Thomas Drant all considered themselves to be writing in a specifically Juvenalian vein. Marston seemed especially to relish this identification, finding in Juvenal what he saw as the true spirit of satire as a satyr-inspired genre. According to Colin Burrow,

Elizabethan satire, certainly when practiced by Marston, can adopt this persona [of the satyr] so fully that it seems to choke on its own spleen, as its exponents seek to transform Juvenalian rage into a bubbling stream of invective which is unbounded by any decorum.

Marston could certainly be one of the most truculent of the Elizabethan satirists, but Burrow’s statement holds true for the majority of his compatriots as well.

Beyond the aforementioned misunderstanding of the etymology of satire, why did so many writers favor Juvenal over Horace as a model for
satiric correction? For some, the potency of vice necessitated an equally forceful response. Anything less than an uncompromising savage indignation might fail to produce the appropriate degree of abhorrence for it. However, it can be difficult to distinguish genuine concern for reform from the use of satiric fervor as rhetorical pose or simply as a way of taking advantage of the current fashion. While many Juvenalian satirists undoubtedly saw themselves as serious moralists, the severity and occasional outrageousness of Juvenalian satire left open the question of its sincerity as a vehicle for reformation.

In the preface to his *Love of Fame, the Universal Passion* (1725–1728), Edward Young writes of Horace: “he appears in good humour while he censures; and therefore his censure has the more weight, as supposed to proceed from judgment, not from passion.” This is, of course, an Augustan assessment of Horace and does not reflect the prevailing attitude of the Renaissance, when “Horace’s argument that humour is more effective than acrimony was, for the most part, rejected.” However, anticipating Young’s assessment, Jonson refused to accept the Juvenalians’ aggressive style as a legitimate response to vice. Jonson was, as Joanna Martindale writes, “strongly committed to a moral and corrective theory of satire,” and the foundation of this theory was Horatian satire. A clue to the reason behind Jonson’s advocacy of the measured censure of Horace can be found in *Satires* 2.1, which Jonson translated and dramatized in *Poetaster*. The satire consists of a dialogue between Horace and the lawyer Trebatius concerning others’ views of Horace’s satire and whether he should continue to write it. In Jonson’s translation (which does not deviate much from the original), Horace denounces “lewd verses,” defending his “sharp, yet modest rhymes/That spare men’s persons, and but tax their crimes,” in clear contrast with the overbearing and punitive nature of Juvenalian satire. Trebatius agrees, adding that Horace will encounter no legal trouble “if thou thyself being clear/Shalt tax in person a man fit to bear/Shame, and reproach.” In other words, one free from vice may safely censure those deserving of it. For Jonson, therefore, the effectiveness of satire is not just about style but also has to do with the character of the satirist, or at least the image he projects of himself. These two concerns are closely connected, as the character of the satirist is manifested in, and determined by, the way he deals with vice. The issue of satiric ethos forms an important part of the satiric debate of the Poetomachia, appearing most prominently in *Cynthia’s Revels* and *Poetaster*. Dekker also addresses this concern with his numerous attacks on Jonson’s personal and professional character in *Satiromastix*. For Jonson’s part, he would insist on the importance of his satiric voice being “free of the faults it censures” and “firmly in control of itself” in order for him to maintain his credibility as a moral critic.

The effectiveness of a Horatian persona, then, could be said to lie in the principled nature of its approach to satire. Just as important, however,
is its exclusion of the qualities of the other major satiric model, namely the lack of restraint and potential hypocrisy entailed in Juvenalian satire. Prescott claims that “Good satirists are implicated in the world they mock, judge, condemn, punish, reform,” but it would be more appropriate to place Juvenalian satirists in this position. This observation brings up an important dilemma recognized by critics as inherent in satire: maintaining a disciplined, reputable persona while at the same time effectively conveying disapproval for the vices and follies being denounced. As previously suggested, Juvenalian satirists tend to heavily emphasize the latter half of this formula. Their harshness and aggression leave no room to doubt their vehement disapproval, but their lack of discipline inevitably blemishes their reputation as moralists. Kernan has this type of satirist in mind when he avers, “the satirist is constantly in the position of denying the same ethic by which he is condemning his victim,” his ruthlessness and violence compromising his moral authority. Or, as Jack D. Winner observes, “the satirist undermines his intellectual and ethical credibility and diverts attention away from the evil he decryes and towards his own violent reaction to it.” The Juvenalian satirists of the age either did not acknowledge or concern themselves with this dilemma, or insisted on the efficacy of their forceful indignation. Jonson recognized it, however, as an impediment for the realization of satire as an effective tool of social reformation and, believing his fellow satirists had failed to resolve it, found his own solution. For Jonson, the answer involved striking a balance, relying on the force of reason to elicit disgust for the vices he portrayed while practicing a restraint intended to uphold his moral authority. Critics have wondered at the lack, at this time, of a theory of satire based on Horace. While Jonson did not fully articulate a cogent “theory of satire,” he did in essence enact a more refined Horatian satiric practice than any satirist of his day, cultivating his distinct style with an eye toward avoiding the potential pitfalls of the Juvenalian satire that dominated the satiric scene.

**Satiric Metaphors, Satiric Roles**

Part of the harshness of late Elizabethan satire lay in the ways in which satirists envisioned themselves and each other. Wheeler’s detailed background on Renaissance verse satire suggests the importance of satiric metaphors, such as whipping and biting, in the visualization of the work of satire. While these metaphors had occasionally been used to describe satire since ancient times, it was in the Elizabethan period that they began to be employed methodically. As Wheeler explains, “In an attempt to intensify its moral purpose the satire could become a whip or a scourge, and the satirist could exhort his sinners to reform by taking up a ‘biting’, ‘snarling’ stance.” Prescott alludes to a broader range of metaphors, describing young writers’ “taste for whips, growls, filth, teeth,
venom, vomit, quills, caustics, scalpels, and the sour yet heady wine of Diogenes’ barrel.”55 In particular, the violent and physical nature of the satire they were writing made it natural for many to assume the role of whippers who lashed their targets. There was also a link between dogs and satire, and it was the Elizabethans, as Wheeler points out, who “developed the association and presented the picture of the barking, biting satirist.”56 Other metaphoric roles include that of the stinging insect, as seen in Thomas Drant’s A Medicinable Morall and William Goddard’s A neaste of waspes, and purger, as in Jonson’s Poetaster. In the Poetomachia, it would be Marston and Dekker adopting the role of satiric whippers and Jonson attempting to correct them through his own satire, conceptualized as purging.57

These metaphors convey how satirists envision their work, and that of satire in general, describing what it does and how it works. They are charged, visceral images that do not stand alone but reflect stylistic choices by the authors who employ them, with those of whipping, barking, biting, and stinging being indicative of a specifically Juvenalian style. Winner observes that “satirists developed a distinct style marked by harshness of diction and meter, extreme ellipsis, and obscurity” in order to fully enact these metaphors.58 While all of these elements contribute to style, these metaphors were embodied primarily in the harsh tone and aggressive nature of the satire. These images suggest violence for the sake of violence, expressing a punitive purpose that tends to overshadow any curative intentions the satirist may have. Jonson saw purging differently, discerning in this metaphor stylistic and reformative qualities consistent with the way in which he wished his satire to be understood.

Jonson’s conceptualization of his satire as a purge has not hitherto been acknowledged as an essential component in his satire, but it plays a key role in his self-image as a satirist. Purging was a metaphor that was occasionally applied to satire, but had never before been harnessed in such a programmatic fashion. The framework of purging lent a strong reformative element to Jonson’s Horatian satire, a style open to criticism for not being earnest about reform due to its geniality.59 By associating his satire with purging, Jonson appropriates this medical procedure’s connotations of effective cleansing, in addition to its already established metaphorical suggestions of broader social reform (i.e. the purging of a state or society). He first employed this metaphor in his humors plays, which borrowed from the ancient belief that four humors in the body govern the temperament and must be kept in balance to maintain physical and psychological well-being. The idea was that humoral imbalances displayed by certain characters would be corrected through satire. As humoral theory provided a medicinal basis for the practice of purging (to remove excess humors), it likewise provided Jonson with a metaphor to describe the action of his satire.
Purging was often seen as harsh medicine and thus tended to be associated with Juvenalian satire. Jonson, however, attempted to rescue this image from his aggressive counterparts, claiming it for his Horatian satire. He took on the role of gentle physician, encapsulating in the purging metaphor his moderate, reasoned approach. In so doing, he was reacting against his contemporaries’ use of other, more violent metaphors lacking the redeeming qualities of purgation. Whipping, stinging, and biting, whether literal or metaphorical, are activities that tend to produce resentment on the part of the victim, perpetuating the indignation and violence driving the initial attack. All satiric metaphors, unless explicitly directed against groups, denote an individual engagement between satirist and target. Purging, however, evokes a broader basis of action, whether it is acting on the various elements within a single body or multiple individuals within society. Identifying his satire with purging was part of Jonson’s effort to establish a more genial approach than his rivals, allowing him to downplay the individual, personal aspect of his satirical engagements and bring out the inclusive nature of his satire as social critique.

The Poetomachia

The differences between Jonson and his rivals helped fuel the Poetomachia, or Poets’ War, which took place from 1599 to 1601 and centered around literary exchanges between Jonson, on one side, and Marston and Dekker, on the other. Some have insisted on the involvement of other writers such as Joseph Hall, John Weever, Everard Guilpin, and William Shakespeare. However, their participation in the Poets’ War was minimal and largely incidental, far from the sustained engagement of Jonson and Marston and, to a lesser but equally important degree, Dekker. For Jonson, the Poetomachia was about reforming satire itself, a task necessitating the reformation of other satirists. Believing his moderate style to be more effective than the Juvenalianism of his rivals at reforming society, Jonson put it on display while directing it against them in an effort to convince them he was right. Rather than attempting to persuade them through other methods, he spoke to them in their own idiom, the language of satire (although his style was Horatian, not Juvenalian), taking as his subject these two satirists he judged to be practicing a vicious, ineffective form of satire.

Modern critics have viewed the Poetomachia variously as a dispute between acting companies, a disagreement over the nature of patronage, a debate on the role of the poet in society, and a battle between neoclassical and romantic values. In light of the importance Jonson places on satire and his satiric persona (especially in the Epigrams), both of which became embattled in the Poetomachia, I will focus on satire as the central issue of the engagement. Although Shakespeare, Weever, Guilpin, and