

A Companion to Renaissance Drama edited by Arthur F. Kinney
Chapter 24
Staging Malcontent in Early Modern England by Mark Thornton Burnett

Characteristics: discontent, satirical railing, neglected appearance, scornful attitude, a sense of unrewarded abilities, Italian vice, split between public and private roles, alienation from women, and rebellious tendencies.

Characters: the melancholy traveler, the villain, the cynic, and the scholar.

The malcontent is likely to speak without worry of the consequences and can be a “potentially disruptive political force.”

In 1628 John Earl said that a fall out with the father was the cause of the attitude of the malcontent (unlike today when it is the mother to blame for needing therapy).

These characters were central to drama of the time due to a cultural climate of inequity and instability.

“In particular, the energies invigorating the malcontent sensibility are translated into a vexed attitude toward language, a heightened theatricality, an alternately vituperative and venerating treatment of women, and a flirtation with phallic aggressiveness.”

Denial of favor leads to malcontent behavior. For example if one were to fall out of the favor of the queen it would lead to the characteristics listed above.

“... a dysfunctional patronage system both weakened governmental capacities and alienated those local elites it was designed to conciliate.”

There were more educated men than the professions had room for which caused frustration because they had to take jobs that were below their skill level. There was an over-supply of lecturers and ministers in particular.

In satires addresses to imaginary audiences and petitions to forces of salvation were the way that grievance and injury were presented.

The malcontent was not just the characters but the playwright himself.

Marston was a phallic satirist. Scenes of phallic aggressiveness. He used a pseudonym (W. Kinsayder) that was a reference to castrated dog (kinsing). Not only is there evidence that the culture was fascinated by the malcontent but Marston's own experience led him to the malcontent. 1599 two books of Marston's satires were publicly burned. He was imprisoned in 1605. Committed to Newgate (prison) in 1608. He left the theater. In 1609 he was ordained as a deacon and then a priest.

Chapman was the younger son who had many financial and legal disappointments. He was imprisoned for debt. A promised life-pension vanished when Henry, prince of Wales, died. He could not secure a patron. He also left the theater.

Malcontent was a masculine trait and was frequently printed male-content.

The malcontent longs for social elevation but realizes that to rise depends upon “parasitic corruption”. The dog was often used as a symbol of melancholy.

Female characters can manipulate men to lose their self-restraint and lose all verbal battles. Women are presumed to be guilty of infidelity.

Verbal motifs (imagery of strangulation, vomiting, linguistic parturition, monstrous birth, swelling, and exploding) “communicate an illusion of escalating tension and unsettling release.” Language defines character and has the potential to ruin personal relationships. But if you control what you say you can acquire political privilege.