

“Oh, Terrible, Windy Words”: Witty Wordplay in Jonson’s *Poetaster*

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Abstract

*Renaissance dramatist Ben Jonson is lauded as a comedy writer extraordinaire. One of his most satirical farces, *Poetaster*, includes a scene involving a character’s vomiting. Beyond the obvious humor, Jonson uses this scene regarding Crispinus to assert sophisticated notions of language use, intellect, and oratory—observations for which the playwright is given too little credit in critical scholarship of the era. This essay fills this gap by examining the scene from a theoretical framework derived loosely from structural linguistics and classical rhetoric.*

“We carry some few words of our common language into the inexorable depths of metaphysics and divinity, in order to acquire some slight idea of those things, which we could never conceive or express; and we use those words as props to support the steps of our feeble understandings in travelling through those unknown regions.”

—Voltaire, *A Treatise on Toleration* (178, with emphasis)

Written long before French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure posited the arbitrariness of the sign relative to its signifier in his *Course in General Linguistics*, Ben Jonson’s *Poetaster* presented a remarkable scene (Act V, Scene 3) in which the pompous Crispinus vomits up the very words he used in his bombastic verses in the scene only moments earlier. The physic, administered to him by none other than Horace himself (i.e., Jonson’s doppelgänger) acts as a purgative, inducing the windy poetaster to expurgate the pretentious terms he employs without clear reference to their respective semantic meanings (especially since Crispinus often uses them incorrectly). Critics have focused primarily on the scene for its satirical commentary on Jonson’s feud with fellow playwrights John Marston and Thomas Dekker, Jonson’s opponents in the War of the Theaters, as well as the extended Jonsonian metaphor of learning as digestion, with language acting as food. Some scholars have come closer to the thesis I plan to establish herein, with notions of Jonson’s embodiment of language in this comical satire (viz., not a comedy, according to Summers and Pebworth [41]). I wish to build on this foundation and expand it further to include the very materiality of language itself—foregrounding words-as-things. While the comedic effect of the retching Crispinus is apparent, the attention Jonson pays to the words themselves as lexical artifacts is significant morphologically, phonologically, and syntactically—particularly because linguistics as a discipline was centuries away from its inception. Jonson’s deft ear for the English language, as well as his Humanist training in the classics, allow him to bring his expansive lexicon to the service of a play that fundamentally berates the fustian rhetors of his day of whom Crispinus stands as exemplar.

Ultimately, finding prose analogues to the purging of Crispinus of haughty vocabulary in the critical works of Jonson does not prove too difficult. In Jonson’s commonplace book, *Timber, or Discoveries*, two selections provide insights into the playwright’s/poet’s views of the “Artificer,” one who abuses language in the construction of vapid, insipid speechifying:

Then in his elocution to behold, what word is proper: which hath ornament: which height: what is beautifully translated: where figures are fit: which gentle, which strong to show the composition manly. And how he hath avoided faint, obscure, obscene, sordid, humble, improper, or effeminate phrase; which is not only praised of the most, but commended (which is worse), especially for that it is naught. (407)

Selection of the *bon mot*—the perfect word that suits the rhetorical situation most appropriately—defies the conventional notion that lexical choices are rarely substantive. Jonson continues in *Timber* to contend that issues of vocabulary and style disclose much about the interior life of the person involved in shaping the discourse:

Language most shows a man: speak that I may see thee. It springs out of the

most retired, and inmost parts of us, and is the image of the parent of it, the mind. No glass renders a man's form, or likeness, so true as his speech. Nay, it is likened to a man; and as we consider feature, and composition in a man; so words in language: in the greatness, aptness, sound, structure, and harmony of it. Some men are tall, and big, so some language is high and great. Then the words are chosen, their sound ample, the composition full, the absolution plenteous, and poured out, all grave, sinewy and strong. (411)

The second of the two selections comes closer to what Crispinus reveals by emptying the contents of his distended stomach into the basin for perusal by the other poets. By overtly observing the words themselves, the physicians are better able to examine the nauseating detritus of Crispinus's vacuous mind. Situated together, these passages from *Timber, or Discoveries* form a Jonsonian framework by which the scene may be more closely read for its larger implications within Jonson's *oeuvre* and his expert command of the nuances of the English language he champions in all of his works.

CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THIS SCENE

Scholars who read this scene generally find two main interpretations of Crispinus's regurgitating words on stage—satire and metaphor—while linking the odd moment to classical and modern precedents. The scene contains several auspicious participants—chiefly Caesar, Horace, and Virgil, a Roman triumvirate of political and oratorical expertise. Against such an august backdrop, Crispinus, the bombastic fool, is portrayed as a foil whose windy words lack substance. At the end of the scene, Horace himself administers pills to relieve Crispinus of his multisyllabic vocabulary, adopted more for show than for rhetorical purpose. One outlier scholar, critic Eugene Waith, seems to be a solitary voice arguing that the Crispinus scene is less important than other critics claim (18-19). He argues that if anything in the vomitorium (a term with its own curious tie to the theater) is to be noteworthy, it is the public punishment of the poetaster—more than any resemblance to Marston that Jonson may have intended in writing the sequence (Waith 19). However, Waith seems to be unsupported in the literature as to this particular reading, as other critics locate other comedies where characters respond similarly.

Editor Tom Cain's notes in the Revels Plays edition of *Poetaster* convey a more conventional interpretation of the scene, reading it as an echo to similar plot devices in other plays. Cain notes similarities between this scene and one in Lucian's *Lexiphanes*. Lyly's lost play, staged when Jonson was 16 or 17 years of age, also may have contained a scene of a character vomiting up his speech (Jonson and Cain 26). Similarly, in Thomas Lupton's *All for Money* (1578), "out of a vomit certain evils are born on the stage" (Baskerville 307). To Jonson, however, authorial intent was key; he was not interested in including plot elements simply because others before him had tried them successfully. A footnote on this scene that cites *Lexiphanes* 21 may serve to sort out a Jonsonian motivation, as the physician monitoring the ill individual coaxes out the poorly-digested words: "Many things still lurk in hiding and your inwards are full of them [; i]t would be better if some should take the opposite

course” (qtd. in Jonson and Cain 250-51). This earlier extant example may have inspired Jonson’s rewriting it because it emphasizes the open display of “inward” folly through uttering words, the value of imagining language as food to nourish or to reject, and the role of a wise mentor who guides the disgorging process.

The critics who write most extensively on this particular dramatic moment in *Poetaster* speculate on the reasons behind Jonson’s choice to place Horace as the character who acts as wise mentor and erstwhile physician to the nauseated Crispinus. In his provoking an act of “brutal physicality” (Koslow 121), Horace comes to the aid of the ailing pseudo-poet. Horace (as another incarnation of Jonson’s frequent self-representation in his work) even redelivers the lines “lost in the vomiting delivery of the boy playing Crispinus” (Jonson and Cain 251). Horace, “a beleaguered intellectual[,]” is a “self-portrait” of Jonson (Hayes 27). Jonson, “this great poet of the belly” (Koslow 122), cannot resist lauding himself as the champion of plain style as the poetaster eructates (or should I say “pukes”?) on stage. The denouement of the play involves a vindication of Horace that exceeds the mere “humiliation of Crispinus[,]” despite this fact being missed by most critics (Waith 19). Waith criticizes scholars who only choose to see the hyperbolic humor in the poetaster’s heaving, thus missing the valorization of classical pedagogues like Horace.

Any contemporary physician could have prescribed relief for Crispinus’s gassy condition, but classical pedagogues such as Horace and Virgil offer him a more lasting cure. The administered physic, an “emetic” of sorts, clears out the pomposity that has filled the poetaster’s belly (Gieskes 94). He has clearly imbibed a stream of cloying vocabulary from some source (viz., Marston and Dekker, as a later discussion will prove) that must be purged before he can get better. Before Crispinus can develop an appetite for “Opheus, Musaeus, Pindarus, Hesiod, Callimachus, ... Theocrite, [and h]igh Homer” (lines 533-35) under the tutelage of none other than Virgil himself, he must disavow the contemporary voices filling his ears (and stomach) with junk food. Horace’s cure is effected “not with a pill, or a purge, but with [Humanist] pedagogy” (Koslow 124). This approach toward healing mirrors Jonson’s own education and valorizing of classical voices. The proven pedagogues of the past offer substance over flashy stylistics. Horace, for example, warns Crispinus against seeking words for themselves (Moul 43). Koslow presses this point in an insightful essay; Jonson “turns to linguistic pedagogy as both an instrument of moral order and a means of physical remedy” (124). While words devoid of content and clear communication are damaging, truth conveyed to us from the ancients has a settling, edifying effect on its hearers.

WHO/WHAT IS BEING SATIRIZED IN *POETASTER*?

With acerbic wit, Jonson allows his most biting satire of his contemporary playwrights and current situations to be couched in hilarious sequences such as the disembodying of Crispinus. Besides examining the obvious ties to the War of the Theaters, critics have found analogues in other events current to Jonson’s time. Cain claims that calumny is the focus in this “encoded commentary on the single most dramatic event in domestic politics around the turn of the [Seventeenth] century: the Essex rebellion of February 1601” (“Satyres” 49).

Cain builds a convincing case through the examination of political and historical documents. Of interest to this study is Cain's claim that Jonson's character choices of Horace and Virgil stem from their actually having rivals during their lifetimes, played in *Poetaster* as Crispinus and Demetrius, in much the same way as Jonson himself had opponents on the London stage ("Satyres" 57).

That Marston and Dekker are meant by the caricatures of Crispinus and Demetrius, respectively, is not a matter of debate. Most scholars recognize a "rivalry between public adult acting companies and private children's companies" operating at the time (Summers and Pebworth 44). *Poetaster* was written for the Children of Queen Elizabeth's Chapel, premiering at Blackfriars Theater in early 1601 (Summers and Pebworth 44). At this point the conflict between these playwrights had lasted almost two full years. Jonson seized the occasion of his most successful comedic satire to lampoon Marston in the guise of the foolish Crispinus, as Jonson's letters to his friend Drummond and Dekker's own recollections attest (Small 38, 40). The character has, at times, a bizarrely eccentric and "recondite vocabulary," just as the rival playwright did (Moul 43), thereby sealing the audience's pigeonholing these characters as their real-life counterparts.

Just in case audience members may miss the correlations, Jonson possibly specified other resemblances between the characters and the playwrights they ape. Apparently, the actors' "dress and demeanour" were meant to mimic that of Marston and Dekker (Moul 25). Some conjecture exists in the scholarship regarding whether Marston actually had red hair as the character Crispinus does (Small 41). To aid in the process of matching up the theatrical with the actual, the anachronistic costumes do not fit the Augustan world of the play. The boys playing Crispinus and Demetrius "wore clothes which parodied Marston and Dekker's: Crispinus wears threadbare satin sleeves over a cheap 'rug' undershirt" (Cain "Satyres" 57). Even the boy actor's fake beard "must have been a comic version of Marston's" (Cain "Satyres" 57). Clearly, Jonson was interested in ensuring that no one confuses this Crispinus with any other in other play. Incidentally, Juvenal includes a Crispinus in his works, as does Horace (Baskervill 306, Moul 27). Without question, the Crispinus in Jonson's *Poetaster* has only one referent: Marston.

Of greatest satiric interest to Jonson, beyond slight resemblances between his actor and his derisive target, is to mimic the inflated diction of Marston's drama. By placing a similarly "pretentious or affected vocabulary" (Jonson and Cain 238) in the mouths of "gull characters" like Crispinus, Jonson spoofs the original author (Marckwardt 94). Astute scholars read Marston's extant works in order to better understand the parodies Jonson constructs through "stilted, affected, and crabbed vocabularies of the day... characteristic[ally] Marstonian" in tone (Baskervill 307). Charles R. Baskervill coins the phrase "word-mongery" to describe the business Crispinus trades in, almost slavishly (Baskervill 307). By foregrounding a buffoon like Crispinus who acts as both poetaster and word-monger, Jonson creates a play that "represents the culmination of the satire on perverted taste and diction which [he] had been developing for several years" in works like *The Case is Altered*, the quarto version of *Every Man in His Humour*, and *Cynthia's Revels* (Baskervill 308). This

layered assault did not escape the notice of the writers whom it was intended to mock.

Scholars make much of the so-called “War of the Theaters” or Poetomachia, a term that attempts to view the plays in a jibing conversation with one another. This “war of words” broke out in 1599. *Poetaster* is “unquestionably a major attack in the conflict” (Summers and Peabworth 44). As in any war, this battle led to other skirmishes. The other two playwrights, Marston and Dekker, responded in kind to the unkind raillery they perceived in *Poetaster*. Marston has his actor mimic Jonson in his *Histrionomastix* (Small 41), while Dekker “ridicules the words and phrases” of *Poetaster* in *Satiromastix* (Marckwardt 93). Rather than tamping down the incendiary rhetoric, *Poetaster* fomented it, ensuring the other playwrights will have plenty of fodder for future campaigns.

THEMES AND EVENTS REFERENCED

Given his appetite for food and his “mountain belly,” Jonson not surprisingly emphasizes a motif in his writing that compares learning to digestion. This theme surfaces elsewhere in other genres, including the epigrammatic poems as well as the verses in *Underwoods*. In “Explorata: Or Discoveries,” Jonson observes that “some men are born only to suck out the poison of books...[who] relish the obscene” (*Timber* in Parfitt 405). Crispinus may have been tempted by words that looked delicious and appetizing, but he feasted on toxic fruit in the works of authors whose florid language only serves to sicken the poetic talent. Once Crispinus’s nausea settles, “Dr.” Virgil prescribes a health regimen that includes a “strict and wholesome diet” (line 524) of Cato’s *Principles* and a “piece of Terence” while shunning Plautus as lacking in nourishment to his soul. One eats to live—to grow and to flourish. A body starved of proper nutrition will languish, much as a mind (e.g., Crispinus’s) fed by arcane terms devoid of their underlying meaning will falter into a diseased state.

Several scholars interpret the spewing scene as an instantiation of a major theme in Jonson’s works: embodied language. Julian Koslow draws connections between the human body and language, demonstrating the “relation between textual and corporeal forms of embodiment and power” (143) that are shown literally within the scene, as “bodies and words react upon and inform each other” (123). Our words come *from* somewhere—they are situated within us as speakers. Words do not exist, particularly in the Renaissance period, as disembodied viscera. Our words emanate from our bodies (*viz.*, our brains, our mouths, our vocal cords, and our lungs) as much as they spring from our thoughts, our wills, and our emotions. In drama, individuals deliver lines as they speak in the guise of a particular character, employing body movements, posture, gestures, and vocal inflections to “embody” the parts for which they are cast. The vomiting scene in *Poetaster* (V.iii) makes literal and kinesthetic a principle Jonson viewed as unique to language itself: embodiment. In this same fascinating essay, however, Koslow maintains that *Poetaster* stands as a “critique of linguistic materialism” through its “materialist conception of language” (121), a claim I vociferously refute.

As I read Act V, scene iii, I am struck by Jonson’s foregrounding of the individual word as a linguistic artifact—what I have called “words-as-things” or what Voltaire may have meant by “words as props” in the epigraph. To better understand this concept as introduced

in the play, please allow me to provide an illustration. As Crispinus upchucks chunks of words (e.g. "glibbery—lubrical—defunct" in line 465) into the catch basin, Horace inspects and repeats the words again (e.g. "[Looking] "Glibbery, lubrical and defunct" [line 468]). The audience recalls the words as having been uttered moments earlier (e.g. Tibullus: "What, shall thy lubrical and glibbery Muse / Live as she were defunct, like punk in stews?" in lines 271-72.) In the first utterance of the words in the play, Tibullus reads aloud the "issue of [Crispinus's] brain" (line 261) and the "bastard" child of Demetrius. Both of these metaphors (i.e., "issue" and "bastard") underscore the notion of language as a real thing—the product of thought that has its own form and substance. Cain scrupulously annotates the initial occurrence of each word, noting where the word first appears in other playwrights' works. In this selected phrase, "lubrical" is Jonson's own addition to the language; this word marks its first appearance in the OED (Jonson and Cain 238). The suffix "al" renders the word an adjective. This morphological construction is a favorite of Marston's, despite the fact that the playwright never uses "lubrical" himself (Jonson and Cain 238). The next nonsensical word, "glibbery," is one of Marston's "favourite adjective[s]"; it stems from one of his coinages: *glib* (Jonson and Cain 238). The third word, "defunct," actually owes its origins to a Shakespearean neologism derived from the Latin *defunctus* (Jonson and Cain 238). Linguists call the purposeful shortening of a word to create a new syntactic part of speech "back formation." Despite the abstruse vocabulary, the poetic lines of Crispinus do express some essential meaning, no matter how unmusical they may sound to the audience's ears. Basically, this couplet means "Shall your smooth, slippery Muse live as a fired prostitute?" Editor Cain points out, however, that the idiom "punk in stews" refers to a "whore in a brothel" (238), so a discharged prostitute would be homeless, rendering "defunct" as being a "misused" term. Jonson's sly characterization, therefore, of Crispinus (or by correspondence, Marston) does not know how to handle properly the terms he wields. When these words reappear floating in bile, they are disconnected from context. The words themselves are accentuated phonologically, for how they sound and not what they mean.

Jonson continues to bring up words, much as Crispinus brings up the contents of his queasy stomach, throughout the scene in question merely for their phonological, morphological, and syntactic resonance, underscoring their importance as things in themselves. Hard-sounding words, with certain loud consonants, apparently have sharp edges that can injure. For example, Crispinus ejects the word "*Magnificate*" (line 473). Maecenas notes that this word "came up somewhat hard" (line 474). Because *Magnificate* is endowed with religious and monarchical meaning, it may be easier to get caught in the throat, especially for a deceiver like this pseudo-poet. Words also seem to act like how they sound: *clumsy* does not flow out of the poetaster's mouth but gets "stuck terribly" on its way up (line 479). Moreover, *clutched* gets stuck in the craw of Crispinus due (according to Caesar) to the "narrow passage" it had to negotiate (lines 509-10). Some of the vomited words act similar to their intended semantic meaning. For example, the word "loquacity" as a synonym for "talkativeness" predates its first official OED appearance by two years in this scene (Jonson and Cain 254). Marston apparently did not invent this final example, demonstrating that

Jonson deliberately coins words in the vein of others he spoofs or lifts directly from the works of his rival playwrights in order to cast them as the true poetasters of his age.

JONSON: PLAYWRIGHT/CRITIC/LINGUIST

Reading Jonson merely as a vindictive playwright trying to even the score with his opponents Dekker and Marston is too reductive in light of the many different ways he refashions words in their first (read or spoken) and second (vomited) appearances in *Poetaster*. This purposeful wordplay allows the audience to be at times as confused as the speakers/writers themselves as to the intended meaning. The spectators—especially the classical writers Virgil and Horace, but even the presumably strong orator Caesar—choose to speak in a plain style compared to the ornate language used by Crispinus and Demetrius. This dialogue foregrounds the age-old rhetorical debate about selecting the most suitable discursive style for a particular occasion. The Latinate terms used by Crispinus and Demetrius in their affected verses contrast sharply with the more plain style (*viz.*, rendered in words originating primarily from Germanic languages) uttered by the ancient Romans. That the Latin greats prefer to speak using more Germanic words is yet another Jonsonian ironic twist. It should be noted that intelligence does not factor into lexical agility in this scene. Obviously, Crispinus cannot differentiate between “defunct punk in stews” and employed prostitutes, thus demonstrating his ignorance. More pointedly, in one particularly phonetic heave, Crispinus spews out the word “*prorumped*” (line 503). Tibellus comments on the “noise it made. . .[a]s if his spirit would have prorumped with it” (line 504). *Prorumped* comes from the Latin *prorumpo*, meaning “to burst forth”—in another instance of a word that does not appear in the extant writings of Marston but accurately portrays Jonson’s coining of new Latinate words (Jonson and Cain 253). Tibellus clearly knows what the word itself means by his pun; he simply chooses not to speak using arcane vocabulary, showing that his linguistic choices reflect not his supposedly Augustan setting but his anachronistic appeal to his Renaissance-era British audience. At issue in this scene seems to be which rhetors are permitted to introduce new terms into the cultural lexicon.

While nimbly peppering his own neologisms and nonsensical terms throughout this hilarious sequence, Jonson queries who is most qualified to coin new terms and to introduce them into the cultural vernacular. A neologism “implicitly conceives of such an utterance as a new, and suddenly lexical, created word” (Saenger 179). In his essay, Saenger concerns himself too overtly with the singularity of the individual word under the umbrella term *neologism*. What term describes new phrases like Crispinus’s “quaking

custard” or “snarling gusts”? Saenger reaches past extant linguistic terms (e.g., “macaronic, multilingual, heterolingual, bilingual”) to coin his own term for the “cohabitation of languages” into the mixture spoken by English speakers: “interlinguicity” (179). By framing his article in measured, scholarly steps, Saenger reifies the notion that introducing new words into the language is the exclusive domain of the intelligentsia. In other words, people who know what they are doing are the only ones qualified to add to a given language. Jonson appears to lack no self-confidence in terms of his own intelligence and erudition, particu-

larly as compared to his rival playwrights (i.e., the poetasters), so he is qualified to make up new words where they are not. A playwright for whom Jonson maintained a healthy respect, William Shakespeare, is famous for the words he introduced into English (Saenger 179). Moreover, Margaret Tudeau-Clayton notes that John Florio's plays also introduced new words into English (e.g. *efface, facilitate, regret, effort, and emotion*) that caught on in linguistic usage. Unlike the "mainly Latinate" neologisms thrown up by Crispinus, these coinages by more respected playwrights represent "opposed ideologies of linguistic practice advocated for the theatre" (Tudeau-Clayton 8). The very fact that Crispinus falls ill at all may be Jonson's nod to the sentiment of Seneca: "the gratuitous coining of words is another sign of moral sickness" (Jonson and Cain 26). Of course, it must be noted that Seneca was writing under the rigid strictures of Latin, whereas Jonson works in the multivariate English language with its many linguistic streams (e.g. Saxon, Old English, French, German, and Latin).

One measure of a play's resonance (and by default the playwright's influence over time) is the durability of the language he uses. If certain phrases become idiomatic expressions or accepted aphorisms (e.g. "to thine ownself be true" from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*), one may safely assume that the playwright has exerted a significant influence by his lexical choices. Another quantitative method involves consulting the definitive resource on the English language, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to mark the first recorded instance of the word's use. In his beefy annotations, Cain takes great pains to mention which words echo Marston's lexicon and which are new—that is to say, which words represent the first *OED* entry. Along with one mentioned above, *lubrical*, Cain points out other first *OED* instances of terms that come up twice in Act V, scene 3 (first in Crispinus's writing and second in his esophagus), including *turgidous, ventositous, oblatrant, and fatuate*, among others. None of these words have become household terms. Plucked from their context—murky as it may be under Crispinus's pen—these words nonetheless are marked as formal, Latinate, and unnecessarily fussy. By contrast, another term, *inflate* (line 487), does make its way as a verb into the English language after the curtain falls at the end of the song or the "Apologetical Dialogue," depending on the ending of *Poetaster* in question. *Inflate* is used in a manner "descriptive of Marston's inflated style, and parodic of his method of coining new words" (Jonson and Cain 252). By creating his own coinages, Jonson riffs on his rival's penchant for doing the same. Tudeau-Clayton explains that the noun Jonson coins as Crispinus is caught stealing a poem belonging to Horace—*plagiary*—is a new word to the English stage (6). Ironically, by lifting many words directly from Marston's works without attribution, Jonson himself has committed an act of plagiarism. As is frequently the case, Jonson makes deliberate rhetorical, dramatic, and poetical choices, so the decision to refer only obliquely to his referents by using their words without naming the sources makes this plagiarism excusable.

Whether mocking a rival by using his language or by inventing his own terms for their comedic effect as the actor, bent over and heaving aloud into a basin, Ben Jonson demonstrates a remarkably nimble capacity for using language. His adroitness at fashioning puns

is nearly unparalleled. When Tibellus reacts to five particularly spectacular terms/phrases in the sputum (e.g. “*Barmy froth, puffy, inflate, turgidous* and *ventositous*” in line 489) by remarking “O terrible windy words!” (line 490), Jonson has Gallus remark, “A sign of a windy brain” (line 491). In other words, pompous words emanate from people who are full of their own self importance but lack anything substantive to contribute.

Upon closer examination, Jonson’s linguistic skill exceeds merely fashioning a catchy turn-of-phrase, such as the one referenced. He seems to love words themselves—their component parts (morphemes), their sounds (phonemes), their connotations and meanings (semantics), as well as their function to reveal what an interlocutor wishes to communicate and how successfully that communication may be assessed by those who receive it. Later linguists, like Saussure, will argue that a word has very little value by itself. What the British call a “tree,” for example, is for the French “*l’arbre*,” yet both words do not fundamentally mean the living organism covered in bark and a profusion of green leaves. These words are signs that users of a common language come to associate with a particular referent or signifier. Those who deal in lexis as tools, however, realize that even signifiers have aural, spatial, and connotative features that help to determine which word fits a given communicative purpose over another choice. Jonson would likely label this discussion “barmy froth,” despite his command of various languages. In the vomiting scene of *Poetaster*, Jonson seems to revel in words for their wonderful wordiness. Vaunted language that may in other contexts (e.g. a performance of one of Marston’s or Dekker’s works) be lauded is herein lampooned. Syllables become plastic. Jonson adds suffixes to elongate the words, making them even more humorous as they emerge as products of Crispinus’s barfing. Words tumble out in a hodge-podge disarray, not in the order in which Crispinus places them in his affected poetic verses. Disconnected from their original function, these words provide Jonson ample opportunities to experiment with language in the myriad ways he does, much to the delight of his Blackfriars audience and to linguistics students approaching this play for the first time.

In our day, scholars and artists tend to respect their respective discursive categories. The writer works in various genres: the lyric poem, the sonnet, the epic, the short story, the novel, the essay, and so on. Similarly, the literary critic offers criticism on the artist’s work, sometimes commenting on how the writing represents the era in which it was produced or how it represents various social movements afoot. In Ben Jonson’s was writing, however, these discrete boundary lines were much blurrier. Jonson is at once a remarkable playwright, poet, and writer, even before the advent of the essay by writers like Montaigne. In *Timber: or Discoveries*, Johnson discusses what makes certain literature artful and significant. Here, he confirms what he dramatizes in *Poetaster*: namely, an author must judiciously and expertly select words for a particular poetic purpose. The use and misuse of language, much like the words a fool uses in conversation, belies that individual’s true linguistic capacity. Trying to ornament one’s speech or writing with fancy words only makes a fool appear more foolish. As Jonson remarks in *Timber*, when a person speaks, his words “show” him to others. A fool’s conversation, despite flowery vocabulary, only displays his ignorance more acutely. Conversely, language, handled deftly (even plainly), evidences a speaker’s intelligence and

capable command of the communicative moment.

In *Poetaster*, the character Crispinus vomits actual words, re-tasting the fancy, multisyllabic examples that he failed to ingest properly, but that is not the underlying reason Jonson includes this outlandish scene in his comical satire. While important, the mockery of Marston and Dekker fails to provide a sufficient cause for its inclusion. Even the continuation of the digestive literary motif or his ongoing interest in the grotesque does not account for the dramatic incident. Moreover, classical and contemporary precedents cannot explain why Jonson wrote this scene thus. From reading the selection from *Timber*, Jonson's Crispinus enacts what his prose teaches: "[Language] springs out of the most retired, and inmost parts of us, and is the image of the parent of it, the mind" (411). While this comparison makes an indelicately mixed metaphor of vomit as one's child (viz., the product's springing not from one's loins but his belly), Crispinus' words do benefit from a comparison to progeny. Children are quite literally the product of a creative act—the most primitive, basic act of creation known to our species. Similarly, every culture on earth uses spoken language, and most have orthographic (written) forms as well. An act of creation, thinking, allows speakers to compose what it is they have to communicate before it is "birthed" as a speech act. Jonson pushes his *Timber* metaphor further in *Poetaster*. As a child grows inside her mother's body before being "uttered" as a self-sustaining entity that grows outside, language helps the speaker to "conceive" a message that is "delivered" to hearers outside of oneself. Jonson suggests that like babies who grow into adulthood, words have "features" that make them become "sinewy and strong" (*Timber* 411). This metaphor relies on a remarkably insightful philosophy of language, that, while debunked by twentieth-century linguists like Saussure and Noam Chomsky, is nonetheless quite sophisticated, particularly for the Renaissance. This linguistic philosophy informs his creative work. By bringing the words back up, literally venting them again abortively from his body in a projectile expulsion, Crispinus is forced to admit that these words cannot grow into maturity. These examples of inflated language—and by default the weak minds that conceived the words—are immature.

CONCLUSION

A formally ill person, once his queasy stomach has settled, needs to eat a healthy diet to rebuild his strength. In a case like Crispinus, when his ailment stems from the poor nutritional/lexical choices he made in his former foolishness, such a person requires guidance from a mentor who can recommend more wholesome, healthful options. Lucky for Crispinus, the gull happens to be surrounded after his vomiting ends by some of the brightest, most articulate minds of classical antiquity. Virgil's prescription to the suddenly deflated poetaster involves "instructions in writing, designed to prevent him from lapsing back into artistic failure" (Moul 42). What follows the purgative episode, according to critic Victoria Moul, is evidence of Jonson's straddling the roles of literary critic and playwright simultaneously. Moul posits that *Poetaster* is Jonson's *Ars Poetica* in miniature: "This concise *ars poetica* bears no relation to any of Virgil's extant works, but it does resemble quite closely certain sections of Horace's advice to poets in the *Satires*, *Epistles*, and *Ars Poetica*" (Moul

42). While I concur with her appreciation of Jonson's literary aptitude to accomplish two aims at once, I see her conclusion faulty simply because she stops short of recognizing Jonson's commentary on language use. To borrow her phrasing, *Poetaster* also stands as a concise *ars rhetorica*.

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