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Scholarly Interiority in the *Parnassus* Trilogy

THE *PARNASSUS* PLAYS ARE PERHAPS the most well known of all university drama. Written by anonymous authors and performed at St John's College, Cambridge, between 1598 and 1601, these three plays focus upon the early modern educative process and the fate that befalls the scholars that that process creates. In this paper I will suggest that in dramatizing the cultivation of learning and the quest for a form of expression commensurate to that learning, the plays bear witness to the inauguration of what I will refer to as scholarly interiority. In undertaking this task, I will make reference both to what scholarly interiority means in the plays, and what it might have meant to the Cambridge students that witnessed those plays.

There are a number of elements that contribute to the creation of this particular identity. The first is the sense of artistic alienation familiar to us from the canonical works of high modernism. Although we are more used in early modern drama to encountering the figure of the educated malcontent than that of the frustrated poet,¹ this minor character type did nevertheless appear.² But it is the *Parnassus* plays that offer the most sustained treatment of the frustrated poet, and in doing so they ask questions about the individual ethical response of the artist to the unforgiving world of commerce and corruption. Yet the educated self is also the product of structures of power dominant in the early modern period, for the plays dramatize the situation of young men from the lower classes that have taken up places at a university populated by the nobility and landed gentry. The combination of a good education and close contact with individuals from a superior social

¹ Indeed, three of the most familiar and interesting characters in early modern tragedy—Bosola, Vindice and Hamlet—are all explicitly constructed as learned men. See John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* 3.3.41–46; Thomas Middleton, *The Revenger's Tragedy* 4.2.46–61; and, of course, *Hamlet*.

² See Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions* (New York: Columbia UP, 1952) 96ff.

class may well have encouraged such students to harbour aspirations that, in reality, were unlikely to be fulfilled. I will argue that it is within this gap between expectation and actuality that scholarly interiority comes into being, and that the public acknowledgement of this form of individuality through dramatic performance went some way towards reconciling the university men to its existence. But I want to start by considering the circumstances of the plays' composition, and begin to draw some connections between those circumstances and notions of interiority and exteriority.

In the second act of the *Second Return from Parnassus*, there is a textual moment that nicely illustrates the very particular circumstances in which the three *Parnassus* plays were composed and performed. Philomusus and Studioso, the plays' two putative leads, have met with little success in their attempts to make a living outside the scholarly enclave of Cambridge University, and they spend much of their time onstage in the two sequels to the original *Pilgrimage to Parnassus* bemoaning their unfortunate circumstances. It is to one of these occasions that I wish to pay attention now. After the latest of the two former scholars' attempts to earn a living fails, Studioso remarks "More we must act in this liues Tragedy."³ The metaphor of life as drama is continued for some five lines that take in the concept of plot, stage, chorus and actors, before some notion of an audience emerges in the remark: "Mossy barbarians the spectators be, / That sit and laugh at our calamity" (*RP2*, ll. 567–68). As J.B. Leishman, the pioneering modern editor of the plays, notes, the *Oxford English Dictionary's* only examples of the use of word "mossy" to mean "stupid" or "dull" come from the *Parnassus* plays. So, in his words, "it may be assumed that we have here a piece of contemporary university slang."⁴ What this first illustrates, then, is the strong coterie element of university drama: these plays were produced in and by a community that shared learning and living experiences, and that spoke about those experiences by using a familiar language that encompassed everything from Aristotelian logic to slang and in-jokes.

At best, such language would mystify outsiders; at worst, it would prove impenetrable. The spectatorial middle-ground, I would hazard, is frustration, and this seems likely to have been the reaction of the printer of the 1606 quarto edition of the play, one G. Eld, who appears to have

³ *The Second Part of the Return from Parnassus* 2.1.561 in *The Three Parnassus Plays (1598–1601)*, ed. J.B. Leishman (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1949). All further quotations are from this edition. Line references are given parenthetically in the text; abbreviating *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus* as *PP*, *The Return from Parnassus* as *RP1* and *The Second Part of the Return from Parnassus* as *RP2*.

⁴ *The Three Parnassus Plays* 103n.

struggled to make out the word “mossy” in the lines I’ve just quoted. We know this because the margin of the 1606 quarto edition of the play erroneously reproduces a printer’s note appended to the lines. The note comprises just two words: “Most like.” Leishman suggests that “most like” is a proposed alternative reading for “mossy,” which the printer may have had difficulty in recognizing, especially given the rarity of its use in this context.⁵ If it is an alternative suggestion, it is a good one, and the line would instead read: “Most like barbarians the spectators be,” thus preserving the metre of the line and losing little of its sense. Of course, the phrase could also acknowledge the difficulty that the word presented to the printer: “mossy” is the most likely reading, but the identification is not conclusive. But there is a third interpretation. Perhaps “most like” isn’t an alternative suggestion at all; perhaps instead it is a comment. Perhaps the printer or reader was referring not to the text, but to its meaning. Does “most like” indicate the printer’s agreement with the observation that the Cambridge spectators of the play were no more than “mossy barbarians”? There can be no way of proving whether or not this is the case, but if we were to allow the possibility, such a comment would be tantamount to evidence of what the play itself says about the relationship of the world of commerce to the world of learning. Printed for profit and abused on its very own pages, *The Second Part of the Return from Parnassus* could thus in some sense be said to be complete within itself, containing explication and proof of its own thesis. Its interior, as it were, both creates and contains its exterior, and it is this conceptual model that I wish to explore with reference to what I will call the scholarly interiority that these plays inaugurate.

Such an interpretation, of course, must also take account of the dual-edged original meaning of the lines as they were spoken on stage. According to a strict interpretation of the *Parnassus* poet’s variation of the popular “world as stage” trope, the “mossy barbarians” are those members of society at large who do nothing to help the frustrated scholar-poets in their quest for a type of employment commensurate with their learning. However, it seems difficult to deny that, in performance, these lines would also be clearly heard as a criticism of those students and academics in attendance at the performance of the play. University drama performances often occasioned what might euphemistically be called “high spirits” amongst students, with shouting, the smashing of windows and even rioting not being uncommon.⁶

⁵ *The Three Parnassus Plays* 262n.

⁶ See, for example, J.W. Clark, *The Riot at the Great Gate of Trinity College, February 1610–11* (London: George Bell, 1906) and G.C. Moore Smith, *College Plays Performed in the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1923).

So directly criticizing the audience in the way that the “mossy barbarians” line clearly does was a dangerous move for the *Parnassus* players to make. That they recognized this danger seems to be borne out by the lines that immediately follow, in which the good character and learning of those that study at Cambridge are explicitly celebrated:

Philomusus: Band be those houres when mongst the learned throug
By Grantaes muddy bancke we whilome song.
Studioso: Band be that hill which learned witts adore,
Where earst we spent our stock and little store.
(RP2. 2.1.569–72)

Yet even after placating the audience in this way, the play cannot help but return a few lines later to criticizing the university that has, as it puts it, with “cosening arts . . . wrought our woe / Making vs wandring *Pilgrimes* to and fro” (575–76). It is clear, then, that the *Parnassus* poet did not work according to blank binary oppositions that posit an inside, academic, educated scholarly world, and an outside, commercial, uneducated, ignorant one. At the root of the scholar’s misfortune in the “outside” world are the “cosening arts” of the university, and the frustrations of the man of the “middling sort” trying to make his way in the world are thus justifiably directed at both that world and academia itself.

Why might this be the case? Having already seen that the plays do not consider the life of the scholar to consist of an Edenic ‘golden age’ of learning followed by the academic equivalent of the Fall, it is worth examining more closely the nature of the scholarly experience as it is represented in the plays, and as it might have been understood by those who attended university in the early modern period. *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus*, the first play in the trilogy and the one in which the young men receive their education, is significantly different from its sequels in both length and style. Much critical engagement with the *Parnassus* plays focuses upon the allusions that the plays make to contemporary social and literary history. However, because *The Pilgrimage* is constructed according to an allegorical scheme, so that the scholars struggle with the familiar distractions that accompany student life rather than with the social realities of the marketplace, the play has been somewhat neglected. Certainly, the two sequels do more to hold the interest of the critic and the audience, packed as they are with humorous incidents that reveal much about the history of early modern drama. However, in dealing with the topic of interiority in the trilogy, an examination of *The Pilgrimage* is essential, because it is the only one of the three plays that attempts to put interiority on the stage. As Paula Glatzer points out, *The Pilgrimage*, like the *Morality* plays it echoes, is concerned

most of all with the notion of “maintaining one’s personal integrity in the face of the social (or worldly) ordeal.”⁷

Whilst this aim is also undoubtedly present in the play’s sequels, they seek to dramatise the plight of the scholar within a recognizable model of early modern society. The *Pilgrimage*, on the other hand, is revealing precisely because this is what it does not do. Instead, we are presented with a highly stylized version of the life of a Cambridge undergraduate, in which the interior life of the protagonists is thrust to the foreground. True, two of the “tempters” that *Studioso* and *Philomusus* must overcome are, as Leishman suggests, modelled to some extent upon identifiable Cambridge alumni—specifically William Gouge and Thomas Nashe—but in the *Pilgrimage* personal satire is always subsumed by the allegorical pattern that the play adheres to. In this spirit, the would-be poets encounter and reject a drunkard (*Madido*), a slow-witted puritan (*Stupido*), a lover (*Amoretto*) and a poverty-stricken, disillusioned scholar (*Ingenioso*) along the path to poetic enlightenment. Just as in the *Moral interludes* of the age, by rejecting the avenues that these characters offer to them, *Studioso* and *Philomusus* are understood to be rejecting their own baser instincts, and to be reaffirming their commitment to the ideal of learning that is symbolized for them by mount Parnassus. On a formal level, then, the play seeks to examine the interiority of the scholar: what it takes for a young man to be able to achieve academic success. However, a closer look at the play reveals that this artistic achievement, the dramatic presentation of the inner life of the scholar, is little more than a pyrrhic victory. For despite the attention that the play pays to “character,” the characters of *Philomusus* and *Studioso* are never developed beyond a superficial level. On encountering temptation, their most common tactic is to offer a heartfelt yet platitudinous response. So when *Madido*, for instance, tries to persuade the pilgrims that the land of *Logic* is far too treacherous a place for them to pass through, *Philomusus* replies:

The harder and craggier is the waye,
The ioye will be more full another day.
Ofte pleasure got with paine wee dearlie deeme,
Things dearlie boughte are had in great esteeme. (*PP*: 249–252)

⁷ Paula Glatzer, *The Complaint of the Poet: The Parnassus Plays; A Critical Study of the Trilogy Performed at St. John’s College, Cambridge 1598/99–1601/02, Authors Anonymous*, Salzburg Studies in English Literature: Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies, vol 60 (Salzburg: Salzburg University, 1977) 30.

Our scholars only falter when they encounter Amoretto and the delights of poetry, yet even after what the audience is led to believe is an offstage dalliance with "sweet wantoninge yonge maides" (*PP*: 473), they return no less one-dimensional than they left. The encounter serves only as a pretext for a brief debate upon the moral position of poetry and the immunity that the honest man will always have to impure verse.

I want to make clear that I am not interested in making any value judgements about *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus*, nor do I consider the dramatic illusion of interiority to be a goal toward which early modern drama should necessarily strive. What I hope I have drawn attention to, though, is the way that the poet of the *Pilgrimage* repeatedly shows that he is uninterested in exploring what we might call the interior life of his characters. However, I do not think that this is because the poet was uninterested in the interior life. On the contrary, if the play is interested in anything, it is the consciousness of the scholar. Yet this means something very different for the *Parnassus* poet than it does for us. In the play, interiority is knowable only through its explicit presentation as *exteriority*, as—literally—the lands that Philomusus and Studioso travel through, and the individuals that they encounter there. The allegorical world of the play is the interior world of the scholar, and although the pilgrims may turn away from the distractions that such a world presents, they do not themselves come to be represented in a different manner because the educative process is not understood to be one that has any effect upon character *per se*. It is in their very desire to become poets that Studioso and Philomusus attain the position that they seek: their poetic identities are complete of themselves at the very start of their journey, and all that they encounter during their four years in Cambridge are distractions from the path that they have already chosen. So the educative process is seen as a dynamic one only inasmuch as it can threaten to diminish the poetic identity that the protagonists have decided upon. The poetic or scholarly "essence," the play argues, far from being nurtured by Cambridge, can only be threatened by it.

To understand why the university experience might have been thought of in these terms, it is worth turning to the realities of Cambridge life in the late sixteenth century for young men like Studioso and Philomusus. So far, I have suggested that the *Second Return from Parnassus* constructs a hostile exterior world that is in fact contained within the interior space of the play by way of a printer's note, and that *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus* exteriorizes interiority as a way of demonstrating that interiority itself is immutable. In both these cases, an interior essence creates and contains an exterior world, be it the unsympathetic world of the marketplace or an allegorized version

of Cambridge. And if we look at the historical Cambridge University, we find this pattern repeated once again in the social sphere. If we examine the social mix of Oxbridge students in the fifteen hundreds, it soon becomes clear that despite what initially seems a quite diverse student population, the colleges were dominated by young men from privileged backgrounds. As Rosemary O'Day noted in her seminal article on the student body of Oxbridge, although "approximately fifty per cent of the student population had plebeian origins" only fifteen per cent were of peasant stock, and the majority of that fifteen per cent were from "relatively prosperous 'yeoman' families and not from among husbandmen and labourers."⁸ Moreover, even the limited opportunities for interaction offered by this heavily unbalanced social mix were thwarted by well-worn notions of class-consciousness. For the sons of the aristocracy and the gentry, attendance at university was not an exercise in broadening horizons but rather a means by which they might preserve and perhaps develop their influence, through the construction of instrumental networks of friendship and patronage, as well as the cultivation of such "learning" as would facilitate their passage through the corridors of power. For these students, scholarship was neither here nor there: going to university was simply one of the rituals to which the powerful must be seen to have paid obeisance.

Philomusus and Studioso are clearly not of the privileged background that most Oxbridge scholars hailed from, and their humble origins are illustrated in the opening scene of the trilogy, where they take leave of Consilodorus. And this lack of status is made abundantly clear by the position in which the scholars find themselves at the beginning of the first sequel to *The Pilgrimage*, after they have obtained their MA degrees.⁹ The first appearance of the protagonists marks the change that has taken place, as Studioso and Philomusus bitterly discuss the futility of the time they spent at Cambridge. Revealingly, this initial comment posits an interior world that is completely at odds with the one presented in *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus*. In my discussion of the *Pilgrimage*, I tried to show how Studioso and Philomusus sought to attain a subject position—that of scholar/poet—which, once achieved, would provide a sense of fulfilment that transcended the need for material and financial comforts. In that play, the inner life was all, and the exterior world of possessions was easily dismissed as irrelevant. Studioso encapsulates this attitude in his remark:

⁸ Rosemary O'Day, "Room at the Top: Oxford and Cambridge in the Tudor and Stuart Age," *History Today* 34 (1984): 32.

⁹ See *RPI*. 1.1.59 and Leishman's note (139).

I knowe that schollers comonlie be poore
 And that the dull worlde there good partes neglecte.
 A schollers coate is plaine, lowlie his gate:
 Contente consists not in the highest degree. (*PP*. 5.640–43)

However, in *The First Part of the Return from Parnassus*, such feelings are conspicuously absent. In the first scene of that play, a very changed Studioso comments:

Fie coosninge artes ...
 Wee, foolish wee, have sacrificed our youth
 At youre coulde Altars euerie winters morne:
 Our barckinge stomacks haue had slender fare,
 Our eyes haue beene deluded of there sleepe:
 Yet all this while noughte els to vs doth gaine,
 But onlie helps our fortunes to there waine (*RPI*. 1.1.86–94)

A vague feeling of dissatisfaction is a common experience after the achievement of a desired goal, and this is certainly one explanation for the way in which the scholar-poets remain unfulfilled after their attainment of the Parnassian ideal. However, scholarly interiority is not merely the expression of this tendency in an academic context. Rather, such interiority comes into being in these plays because of the particular changes in their form, genre and plot that occur when the transition is made from the first play to its sequels. Whilst the *Pilgrimage* remains close to its morality play origins in the allegorical presentation that it gives of its protagonists' interior journeys, it also demonstrates a similar understanding of the moral value of learning. As Studioso's first quote above makes clear, the Parnassian version of the 'good life' is no different from the idea of 'virtuous poverty' that had been a constant in Western philosophical discourse throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. Scholarly interiority—an expression of the inner life that particularly reflects the situation of the early modern poet—occurs as a result of the way that the *Parnassus* sequels connect the scholarly version of 'virtuous poverty' with the real conditions of literary production in the age. This is, after all, the major innovation of those sequels, as the interest of the audience is held by removing the allegorical frame that surrounded Studioso and Philomusus and by thus placing what were little more than collections of platitudes masquerading as characters into a recognizably accurate version of contemporary society. Indeed, Studioso's quoted speech from that play can be read as the character's indignant discovery of his new three-dimensional corporeality, through the bitter recognition of his age, his hunger, his tiredness and his bad fortune. Once the scholar-poets become aware of this new, 'real' world, they become aware of their place in it, and this perception of the physical world and their own attendant physicality

is accompanied by a deep sense of emptiness that it is beyond the power of the world to satisfy. Scholarly interiority in the plays is thus represented as a gap in subjectivity, but that gap arises in direct response to another: the distance by which the ideal allegorized version of Cambridge falls short of the actual world within which scholars must attempt to scrape a living.

But beyond this formal effect, in which a particular selfhood makes itself known through the unique characteristics of the *Parnassus* trilogy, both the first and second parts of *The Return from Parnassus* offer circumstances in which scholarly interiority is cultivated. For the plays dramatise the repeated frustration, and consequent lowering, of the expectations that the scholar-poets entertain about their status and employability. For *Studioso* and *Philomusus*, the condition of the scholar is one of utter despair, and this despair is increased by the knowledge that they had initially seen a Cambridge education as a way of escaping such a fate. *Philomusus* makes such an attitude clear in the following lament from *The Second Part of the Return from Parnassus*:

In our first gamesome age, our doting sires
 Carked and cared to haue vs lettered:
 Sent vs to Cambridge where, our oyle yspent,
 Vs our kinde Colledge from the teat did teare,
 And for'st vs walke before we weaned weare. (*RP2*. 3.2.1411–15)

The expectations set up by a university education, expectations that, in actuality, might well have been encouraged by the conspicuous presence of undergraduates from the nobility and the gentry, were to prove rather insubstantial once the college gates had been left behind. The climax of the final play in the trilogy resolves the scholar's dilemma by gesturing towards an unlearning of everything that a university education represented. For the scholars resolve to spend the rest of their days as shepherds, with the only remembrance of their academic endeavours being the "Turning of [a] Cambridge apple before the fire" (*RP2*. 5. 4. 2097). In this way, *Philomusus* and *Studioso* thus eventually arrive at a degree of contentment about their ultimate life-style, and by sending its protagonists off to a Spenserian pastoral idyll the play neatly reintroduces the notion of the spiritual gains of learning for its own sake. However, such an ending might seem a rather bleak one, especially to a Cambridge student audience convinced it was watching a play set in a familiar London rather than an allegorical Arcadia. But as I suggested at the start of this paper, the playwright of the *Parnassus* plays was not afraid of offending his audience, and while I do not think that he necessarily had a desire to offer his scholarly spectators any hope about the world outside Cambridge, such hope does nevertheless present itself.

The most famous scene in the trilogy is the onstage appearance, in *The Second Return*, of Richard Burbage and Will Kempe, for whom Studioso and Philomusus audition. As Glatzer comments, this scene, amongst others, is a clear indication that the London stage is known to the *Parnassus* playwright. Such knowledge suggests ambition, and whilst his characters audition to be mere players, perhaps this scene reveals the *Parnassus* playwright's ambition to follow in the footsteps of Marlowe, Green, Lyly and Nashe: the University wits.¹⁰ In representing the London stage, the play's interior once again contains its exterior. That is, it performs London in Cambridge, perhaps with the desire of performing Cambridge in London. In bringing the hostility of the world to college drama, then, the *Parnassus* plays warn scholars of what might await them, whilst also validating the subject position into which their education and their expectations have placed them. Yet, in pointing to the London stage, they also offer a way of reconciling education with commerce, and of thus maintaining a stable and uncompromised interior life.

¹⁰ Thomas Randolph was able to do exactly this. In 1631, while still an MA student at Trinity, Randolph's plays *The Entertainment* (also known as *The Muses' Looking Glass*) and *Amnytas* were performed by the Children of the Revels. See G.C. Moore Smith, *Thomas Randolph*, Warton Lecture on English Poetry, British Academy, 1927 (London: Oxford UP, 1927).