

# New Aspects in the Tragedy and Tragicomedy of Beaumont and Fletcher

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## ABSTRACT

The beginning of the dramatic career of Beaumont and Fletcher coincided with rapid social change: a split in the audience between the young intellectuals who preferred to frequent the "private" theatres, and the lower classes who went to the "public" ones. Up to 1608 the London theatre audience had included a complete cross-section of society ranging from courtiers to servants. After 1608, the dramatic current ran more towards the private theatre, and the "Blackfriars" became the centre of the dramatic activities of the "King's Men". The Blackfriars, an indoor private playhouse, possessed some important features and facilities which favoured some new dramatic forms and ingredients different from those of the "Globe": a public theatre which was open to the sky. Such new forms and ingredients were readily introduced in Beaumont and Fletcher's plays.

Through an analytical study of *The Maid's Tragedy* (1611) as tragedy, and *Philaster* (1609) as tragicomedy, this paper throws into relief the new tone, spirit, atmosphere, and aspects of the new genre of tragicomedy contemplated and achieved by the two dramatists.

Most remarkable of these are sensational, skilfully-contrived and melodramatic situations, with startling witty conceits, together with a lively representation of human passions, especially love.

Furthermore, this study explores some striking political and social concerns introduced in the plays, which bear significantly on the contemporary world. Of these is the nature of the relationship between king and subject which recalls the contemporary struggle against king James I's royal prerogative. Again, there is in the plays a celebration of the active role acquired and performed by woman, and a shift of emphasis from hero to heroine, which coincided with the serious interest that was developing outside the drama in the place and role of woman in the Jacobean world. Such new aspects must have fascinated the intellectual playgoers at the time.

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Their [Beaumont and Fletcher's] plays are now the most pleasant and frequent entertainments of the stage; two of theirs being acted through the year for one of Shakespeare's or Jonson's: the reason is because there is a certain gaiety in their comedies, and pathos in their more serious plays, which suit generally with all men's humours. Shakespeare's language is likewise obsolete, and Ben Jonson's wit comes short of theirs (Dryden, 1966:365).

John Dryden, virtually the first man of letters in English literature, and the most eminent poet laureate, critic, and playwright of the seventeenth century, paid tribute to Beaumont and Fletcher for their great achievements in drama which well suited the palates of their own audience as well as Dryden's own. **The Essay**, from which the foregoing quotation has been extracted, was written in 1668, only a few years after the Restoration of monarchy in England, in 1660, and after many years of social unrest, civil war, and a republican regime. When the Restoration age started, with the coming back of King Charles II from his exile in France to reign the country, he and his cavalier courtiers had acquired certain gentlemanly manners, morals and habits which they wanted to establish in England.

The audience that frequented and dominated the playhouses at the time Dryden was paying his high tribute to these dramatists was a highly select audience largely drawn from the upper classes or from the more intellectual and liberal middle class. What this coterie audience favoured was a genre of drama which combined sensational, skilfully-contrived and melodramatic situations, with startling witty-conceits, together with a lively representation of human passions, especially "love"—aspects which permeate the make-up of Beaumont and Fletcher's plays, and especially their two masterpieces: **Philaster** (1609), and **The Maid's Tragedy** (1611).

It is not surprising, then, that Dryden should so much admire Beaumont and Fletcher that he raises their plays above Shakespeare's. For in his opinion:

Their plots were generally more regular than Shakespeare's, ...; and they understood and imitated the conversation of gentlemen much better; whose wild debaucheries, and quickness of wit in repartees no poet before them could paint as they have done (Dryden, 1966: 365-6).

In this article, an attempt will be made to assess the tragedy and the tragicomedy of Beaumont and Fletcher, with special emphasis on the new aspects which distinguished the plays and dominated the playhouses, at the time, and which strongly appealed to the contemporary audience. An assessment of this kind would require a brief outlining of the lives of the

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curious double personality of the dramatists, since it will appear that their upbringing and environment made them part and parcel of the world they presented on the stage. Indeed they did not have to go much farther than the courtly life around them for the subject-matter of their plays.

Francis Beaumont (1584/5-1616) and John Fletcher (1579-1625) were descendants of the gentry and of a poetic race, although their families were not prosperous. Beaumont's father was a judge, and his grandfather "a member of the judicial hierarchy, having filled the office of Master of the Rolls". (Strachey, 1949: xi). Fletcher's father was, first, Dean of Peterborough, next Bishop of Bristol, then of Worcester, and finally of London.

Ian Fletcher tells us that he was "a handsome courtier and a favourite of Queen Elizabeth", and that he "had been disgraced by a late second marriage and died soon after, leaving his son to make his way in the world"(Fletcher, 1967:12).

In addition to the young playwrights' possession of the graceful reading of their class, the one having graduated from Oxford, and the other having probably gone to Cambridge, Loe Strachey discerns other sources of influence which must have inspired the mind of Fletcher with material for the stage. On the one hand, we hear of the poet's home surroundings where:

At his feet ran the deep, clear, and still unpolluted Thames, swelled by many a tributary brook—fit examples for the poet of **The Faithful Shepherdess** (Strachey, 1949:xv.).

On the other hand, there was the inner knowledge of the court acquired by Fletcher's father, which he must have taught his son, and which the poet's scenes so often show, for:

Richard Fletcher had been the chaplain appointed to wait upon the unhappy Queen of Scots during the last days of her imprisonment; and it was he who attended her in the concluding agony of her long struggle (Strachey, 1949:xv-xvi).

Beaumont and Fletcher started writing for the stage at a time when Shakespeare had already written the majority of his plays. The beginning of their career as dramatists coincided with rapid social change, namely, a split in the audience between the young intellectuals and men-about-town who preferred to frequent the "private" theatres, and the lower classes who went to the "public" playhouses. For in the year 1608, Ian Fletcher reports, The King's Men, for whom Shakespeare had written and Beaumont and Fletcher were to write, took over the private theatre called Blackfriars.<sup>(1)</sup> The King's Men also maintained the public Globe theatre but the Blackfriars became the centre of their dramatic activities:

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Indeed, after 1608 the dramatic current ran more and more towards the private theatres. The divergence between two types of audience was thus accentuated. Up to 1608, the London Theatre audience had included a complete cross-section of society which ranged from students, courtiers, and merchants down to servants, pickpockets and prostitutes (Fletcher, 1967:16).

The Blackfriars was an indoor private playhouse with candlelight and facilities of vision and scenic effects which favoured some new forms and ingredients different from those of the Globe theatre which was open to the sky. Professor Gurr enumerates some important Blackfriars features, not possessed by the Globe, which were made possible by the shift of setting from the open air to the indoor theatre. Of these the introduction of music, the inter-act pause, masquing, and dancing are most significant (Gurr, 1973:xxxv-x1). The nature of the "select" audience of the Blackfriars, as previously mentioned, must have both appreciated and encouraged the delicacy and the refinement of these new features.

Beaumont and Fletcher's first success was of course with Beaumont's own **The Knight of the Burning Pestle** (1607) which satirizes the citizen and his wife, and is thus characteristic of the new trend. But it is **The Maid's Tragedy** and **Philaster**, after the still experimental **The Faithful Shepherdess**, that are full-fledged masterpieces of tragedy and tragicomedy to which Shakespeare's last plays are usually related.

A glance at the main conflict in **The Maid's Tragedy** would reveal one of the most favourite themes that strongly appealed to the courtly society of James I, namely, love versus honour. Aspatia, the young lady who stands for the idea summed up in the title of the play, has been betrothed to Amintor, a noble youth who is much admired and beloved as a man of honour. But the king demands that Amintor should break his match with Aspatia and get married to Evadne, sister to Melantius, Amintor's own close friend and also the king's general. It turns out that Evadne is the king's own secret mistress and Amintor has been chosen to play the part of a fence to the king's liaison with Evadne. Melantius manages to know the secret of his friend's shame and his sister's dishonour and, as soldier, he determines to avenge himself on the lecherous, tyrannical king. The play ends with the king's murder at Evadne's hands, Aspatia killed by Amintor, and herself wounding Amintor who then stabs himself, and a new regime opens with a new king with Melantius by his side.

**The Maid's Tragedy** can thus be considered a gentlemanly drama that takes for its main preoccupation the conflict between personal, family honour and loyalty to a king. In this play an extraordinary thing is introduced, namely, the notion that: what an individual gentleman with a code of manners and morals can do for a lustful, tyrannical king who is an absolute!

At the beginning of the play, Amintor is introduced to us by his bosom-friend Melantius, as "valiant and temperate" and a devoted friend. On his return from the battlefield, Melantius, whose virtues as soldier defending the honour of the country are much praised, wishes Aspatia a happy marriage to Amintor. But he is soon informed that Amintor has broken off his match with Aspatia and has, by the king's order, accepted to get married to Evadne.

The opening of the play focuses on the military and heroic virtue of Melantius whose personal and family honour is conceived as invulnerable and absolute, as well as on the "Maid"'s tragedy embodied in the pathetic figure of Aspatia who has been forsaken, and indeed betrayed, by Amintor for Evadne. The nuptial "Masque" which precedes Amintor's wedding night, with its ironic implications, prepares the audience for witnessing a wakeful and tiring night for a bride and bridegroom who are destined to play the loving man and wife.

The dramatists seem to have taken pains to make Amintor's dilemma as dramatically effective as possible. Thus, on his way to consummate his marriage, Amintor feels he has "wronged" Aspatia whose grief is shooting suddenly through all his veins. Yet he manages to overcome his guilty conscience by recalling to himself that it was the king who ordered it, and comes to the conclusion that his case is not that blameworthy:

My guilt is not so great  
As mine own conscience, too sensible,  
Would make me think; I only brake a promise,  
And 't was the king that forc'd me. Timorous flesh,  
Why shak'st thou so? Away, my idle fears!

(II.i.129-133)<sup>(2)</sup>

Amintor's effort is thus devoted, at the moment, to justifying his breaking off the promise he made to Aspatia, in his great expectations of the marital joys with the beautiful Evadne. Like one who has decided to run away from a shameful act one committed in the past, he deceptively indulges himself in anticipating the pleasures of the consummation to come. Yet he soon discovers that his bride cannot go to bed with him, for she has sworn she will not. In his simple sentimentality and playful mood, Amintor thinks it may be the "coyness of a bride", and seeing that she has an angry look, he offers to protect her from the man that can have wronged her—an heroic stance which Evadne cold-bloodedly endorses:

Wilt thou kill this man?  
Swear, my Amintor, and I'll kiss the sin  
Off from thy lips.

(II.i.175-177)

When he insists on knowing the cause before swearing to revenge her, she starts enlightening his mind:

I would thou wouldst.  
 Why, it is thou that wrong'st me; I hate thee!  
 Thou shouldst have kill'd thyself.

(II.i.178-180)

It is obvious that the theme of appearance and reality permeates the whole of **The Maid's Tragedy**. Here in the discovery-scene where the moral "witty conceit" is elaborated into fantastic proportions, it assumes such an endless series of titillating twists and puns that must have strongly appealed to the palates of the contemporary coterie audience. The innocent victim of the deep dramatic irony implicit in the foregoing lines, Amintor thinks that he is more than capable of revenging his wronged lady. Little does it occur to his mind, or indeed to the audience's, that it was the king that wronged Evadne. Thus, Evadne's "Thou shouldst have kill'd thyself" takes on a meaning that, though completely hidden at the moment to both Amintor and the audience, will be clarified when Amintor commits suicide at the end of the tragedy.

In his horrid perplexity of mind he finds refuge in imagining that she may be trying his constancy, because her innocent beautiful face is far from falsehood, or she might have sworn to any of her virgin companions to preserve her maidenhead a night! But his illusion is at once shattered by Evadne's sardonic, rhetorical thrust: "A maidenhead, Amintor, /At my years"! (II.i.190-191), and in the whirlwind he finds himself in he suspects she is either raving or else some fever is raging in her blood. Yet Evadne, cold-blooded and contemptuous, starts to disclose to him the nature of the mock-marriage they have been given, reassuring him that she is neither mad nor coy, but is simply giving him the truth. Nor is it for a night or two she forbears his bed, but for ever! In his frustration he invokes Heaven to sustain his faltering spirits that he may be relieved of his acute problem:

You powers above, if you did ever mean  
 Man should be us'd thus, you have thought a way  
 How he may bear himself, and save his honour;  
 Instruct me in it, for to my dull eyes  
 There is no mean, no moderate course to run:  
 I must live scorn'd or be a murderer.

(II.i.239-244)

The turn Amintor now takes is to use his force in claiming his marital rights from Evadne, threatening her with death if she does not obey. A callous brute hardened by sin, she is not afraid; he had better be warned or she will be revenged at full, and she comes nearer to naming the man:

I do enjoy the best, and in that height  
 Have sworn to stand or die! you guess the man.

(II.i.293-294)

When he fails to conceive who the man is, she says "Why, 'tis the king", and Amintor is overwhelmed by fear:

Amintor: 'Tis not the king!

Evadne:

What did he make this match for, dull Amintor?

Amintor:

Oh, thou hast nam'd a word that wipes away  
All thoughts revengeful; in that sacred name,  
"The king," there lies a terror. What frail man  
Dares lift his hand against it? Let the gods  
Speak to him when they please; till when, let us  
Suffer and wait.

(II.i.302-309)

The process of humiliation which Amintor undergoes, in his acute social and moral predicament, reaches its culmination when he wonders what motive Evadne can have had behind getting married to him. Evadne's shameless retort to him gives him the blunt, bitter fact that he has been deliberately chosen to play the tame cuckold:

Evadne: Alas, I must have one

To father children, and to bear the name  
Of husband to me, that my sin may be  
More honorable.

(II.i.313-316)

At this anticlimactic moment, the Petrarchan idealist who offered to show his heroics, at the beginning of this great scene, should now dwindle into a tame cuckold seeking salvation merely in death. In vain does he beg Evadne to show mercy on him by killing him. Thus puzzled and horror-stricken, he submits to his disgrace and resolves to hide his shame from the world, and play the hypocrite:

Methinks I am not wrong'd,  
Nor is it aught, if from the centuring world,  
I can but hide it. Reputation,  
Thou art a word, no more!-

(II.i.329-332)

Having been terribly shattered by the bitter facts of his extreme position, Amintor succumbs to his loss of his real honour and desperately convinces himself to live on the level of appearance:

Come, let us practise, and as wantonly  
As ever loving bride and bridegroom met,  
Let's laugh and enter here.

(II.i.354-356)

In designing this “witty-conceit” Beaumont was aiming at creating something new and, as Professor Ornstein points out, he must have been drawn to *Hamlet* because he saw its hero as a paradigm of the contemporary “splintered” personality, and Shakespeare’s most fascinating character: a master of a hundred moods and poses, who knows not what seems:

Evidently no scene in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy impressed Beaumont’s and Middleton’s imaginations as did the closet scene in *Hamlet*, for the most effective moments in their tragedies are, ..., restaging of this climactic scene of moral and psychological tension, when a hero, torn by love and hate, pity and contempt, indignation and cynicism, forces an impercipient, irresponsible heroine to face her own vileness. (Ornstein, 1965:174)

Amintor, like Hamlet, is a master of a hundred moods and poses, and, like Aspatia, is the victim of a vile and lecherous king armed with the divine right of kings. The process of humiliation which Amintor must suffer at the hands of the king reaches its extremity when the Petrarchan triangle is turned upside down with Amintor, the husband, made his own wife’s bawd. The most complex and ingenious conceit, now creating one more ironic perversity, reveals Amintor so overplaying his role of satisfied husband that the king is taken in by the ruse. Another absurd victim of the many-sided theme of appearance and reality, he demands an explanation from Evadne lest he, the sinful seducer, should be cuckolded by the rightful, frustrated husband! He now warns Evadne, “I see there is no lasting faith in sin”, to which she swears she has never stained the king’s “honour” by sleeping with her own husband, and, more ironically still, she reproaches Amintor for sowing “Dissention amongst lovers”! It is not out of place here that Amintor should recall the faithless sin he committed against fair Aspatia which is not yet revenged, and he starts to draw his sword defying the king whose own drawn sword prompts Amintor’s acquiescence; a reaction that made one critic call the dramatists “servile *jure divino* Royalists.” (Coleridge, 1936:69). Amintor staggers

But there is  
Divinity about you that strikes dead  
My rising passions; as you are my king,  
I fall before you and present my sword  
To cut mine own flesh, if it be your will.

(III.i.245-249)

Of course there are certain factors in the play that justify this disgraceful submission to the king’s tyranny, such as Evadne’s beauty, the fact that her brother is Melantius, Amintor’s own dearest and most intimate friend, Amintor’s guilty conscience that tells him he must suffer

retribution for his infidelity to Aspatia, and, above all, the royal prerogative that was, at the time, considered a sacred and indisputable right.

But if to the passive Amintor the time has, so to speak, been "out of joint" there is a more commanding man of action in the play who must have been designed by the dramatists "to set it right" by exacting upon the lustful king the most severe poetic justice and thus give the play its calculated dénouement. Melantius, a Ventidius-like blunt and honest soldier, observes that his friend is suffering and manages to know the horrid secret of his friend's grief. From this moment on, Melantius becomes the instrument of fate, determined as he is to avenge the honour of his family and to be constant to his purpose. The rival absolutes of friend, family, royal prerogative are all integrated by Melantius into simple, honest, soldierly honour that has real weight and substance:

and for you my king,  
Your subjects all have fed by virtue of  
My arm. This sword of mine hath plow'd the ground  
And reap'd the fruit in peace,  
And you yourself have lived at home in ease.

(IV.ii.165-169)

The scene between Amintor and Melantius is indeed the turning point of the play. As Professor Danby points out:

From now on the interest is maintained more by the external movement of the plot than by the internal pressure of wit and the moral punning of the separate scenes. (Danby, 1965:198)

But Amintor would not have Melantius kill the king, as this will expose him as a tame cuckold. A quarrel ensues between the great friends and nothing saves them from a fatal duel but friendship: "The name of friend is more than family,/Or all the world besides." To take his vengeance without causing his friend further shame and suffering, Melantius manages to make Evadne swear to wipe out her own and her family's disgrace in a scene that once again recalls what happens between Hamlet and his mother in the closet scene:

Melantius: Dost thou  
Not feel, among all those, one brave anger  
That breaks out nobly and directs thine arm  
To kill this base king,

Evadne: All the gods forbid it.

Melantius:  
No, all the gods require it; they are  
Dishonored in him.

(IV.i.143-149)

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It is calculated that Evadne should take the revenge herself on the lecherous king, although it is Melantius that has forced her into doing it. When she gets into the king's chamber and wakes him, he thinks she has come for his pleasure, but she enlightens him:

I am not she, nor bear I in this breast  
 So much cold spirit to be call'd woman;  
 I am tiger; I am anything  
 That knows not pity.

(V.i.64-67)

The way Evadne ties the king's arms to the bed, the tone in which she calls and awakens him, and the fierce manner in which she rejoices at mocking and torturing him—show how overwhelmed by shame and disgust she must have been. It is significant that the king simply cannot believe what Evadne is determined to do:

Thou dost not mean this; 'tis impossible;  
 Thou are too sweet and gentle.

(V.i. 72-73)

Having faced him with the debasement he has brought upon her and her family, she starts her revenge. The fierce way in which Evadne performs the killing of the king echoes such cruelty, malignity, and indignation that only a character like Lady Macbeth is capable of performing. She ends the life of the king with three deadly strokes:

This, for my Lord Amintor!  
 This, for my noble brother, and this stroke  
 For the most wrong'd of women!

(V.i.109-111)

Melantius has already seized the king's citadel after a scene of interesting ironic comedy with Calianax, on which comment will be made later. This, together with the death of the king, seems to have brought the play to its dénouement. Yet three deaths are still there in store. In the final scene of the tragedy, Aspatia, in man's apparel, pretends to be her own brother come back from the wars to meet Amintor to avenge on him "the baseness of the injuries" he did Aspatia. In a duel between the two Aspatia is fatally wounded. In the meantime, Evadne enters with bloody hands and a knife, to tell Amintor "the king is dead" and to commit suicide herself. Finding that Aspatia has died, Amintor stabs himself to keep her company. A new regime opens with the late king's brother, Lysippus, as king supported by Melantius. Appropriately, the new king utters the moral of the play:

May this a fair example be to me,  
 To rule with temper; for on lustful kings  
 Unlook'd for sudden deaths from heaven are sent;

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But curs'd is he that is their instrument.

Now the killing of the king, at the end of this tragedy, has raised much controversy among the critics of Beaumont and Fletcher. Some of them, such as Howard B. Norland, found the ending pessimistic and inconclusive since "the problems of honour initiated by the perversion of love have been developed, but they have not been resolved" (Norland, 1968: xxi). Others argued that the ending is daring in that it allowed the killing of the king at the hands of one of his subjects, an act that King Charles II dared not face or tolerate on the Restoration stage. Thus the ending of **The Maid's Tragedy** had to be altered and Edmund Waller undertook to rewrite the fifth act to convert the tragedy into a tragicomedy in order to keep the king alive (Strachey, 1949: xxxiii).

Yet a fifth act in itself does not make a tragedy or a tragicomedy what it really is. To have saved the king from his bloody death at the hands of Evadne does not change the tragedy into a tragicomedy merely by changing the dénouement. Even if we are willing to overlook the most serious and problematical dilemmas in which both Melantius and Amintor have been involved, we cannot for a moment forget the most pathetic figure of Aspatia. From the opening of the play to its conclusion this figure animates the tragedy with such a spirit of disorder and unrest and even premonition that recalls to our mind Ophelia's madness and the Ghost's forewarnings in **Hamlet**. As Professor Gurr argues, "Nothing at any stage in the development of **The Maid's Tragedy's** situation gives any hope of escape from the problems honour poses;" the only relief from the sombre mood is in the minor figure of Calianax (Gurr, 1973: xix).

It is in **Philaster** that Beaumont and Fletcher gave the best expression of the tragicomic form they were endeavouring to achieve. In this tragicomedy can be discerned the blending of comic episodes and an atmosphere of impending disaster. Here the lightness of touch, the optimistic outlook on humanity, and the tolerant attitude to human weaknesses and limitations make the happy ending both inevitable and plausible. Fletcher had already contemplated the new tone and atmosphere in his design of **The Faithful Shepherdess**, in 1609. In his preface to the first edition of this play he defines the new genre of tragicomedy as follows:

A tragi-comedy is not so called in respect of mirth and killing, but in respect it wants deaths, which is enough to make it no tragedy, yet brings some near it, which is enough to make it no comedy, which must be a representation of familiar people, with such kind of trouble as no life be questioned; so that a god is as lawful in this as in a tragedy, and mean people as in a comedy ...<sup>(3)</sup>

Study of **Philaster** will at once reveal a much lighter touch and a more

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optimistic and cheerful tone than those discerned in the foregoing assessment of **The Maid's Tragedy**.

Philaster is a nice, noble-natured and gallant prince of Sicily who is suffering from a Hamlet-like dilemma. His throne has been usurped by the present king whose only daughter, Arethusa, is Philaster's own beloved. Therefore, the young prince, who is loved and admired by the people and hated by the king, is given to indecision. Euphratia, daughter to Lord Dion, and secretly in chaste love with Philaster, passes herself on him as a boy named Bellario. In this disguise she is sent by Philaster as his page to Arethusa. In order to perpetuate his possession of the thrones of Sicily and Calabria, the king has betrothed his daughter, Arethusa, to a Spanish prince named Pharamond. This match is not tolerated by Dion and the courtiers of the king, as it would perpetuate Philaster's dispossession of the throne of Sicily. Nor does Arethusa herself like the Spanish prince who proves himself to be a foolish libertine. In his indiscriminate hunting for pleasure he finds an easy liaison with Megra, a loose lady of the court. The main action of the play is set in motion when this liaison is discovered, and when Megra, in an attempt to defend herself and preserve her favour at court, accuses Arethusa of having herself a love affair with the supposed page, Bellario. Philaster is induced to believe that both Arethusa and Bellario are false to him, first, by the great affection Arethusa has for the "page" and, again, by Dion's testimony that the accusation is true, being motivated by the desire to rouse Philaster into rebellion against the king to regain his usurped throne.

In a complicated development that takes the whole of Act IV, the king and the court go hunting in the woods near the palace. In the same pastoral setting wander the jealous Philaster and the abused Arethusa and Bellario. There a confrontation takes place between the three characters which involves the wounding of Arethusa and Bellario by Philaster's sword, and which recalls the "witty-conceits" and the moral punning of **The Maid's Tragedy**, although in **Philaster** there is much less intensity than in the tragedy. Disabused and conscience-stricken, Philaster owns his errors and recognizes both Arethusa's and Bellario's worth and fidelity. In prison, where Arethusa gained custody of Philaster and Bellario as her prisoners, the three are reconciled and the hero and heroine get married.

The fifth and last act of **Philaster** is a very ingenious dénouement of a well-made tragicomedy. Philaster heroically confronts the tyranny of the king who decided to punish him and his daughter to death, and all three characters: Philaster, Arethusa, and Bellario generously plead each other's cause. A happy surprise now occurs when a messenger comes on the stage and announces that the citizens have taken Pharamond prisoner, and that, "the city is in mutiny in rescue of the Lord Philaster".

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The noble-natured Philaster deals mercifully with both Pharamond whom the angry citizens would cut into pieces, and the king who confesses his guilt, and turns over the throne of Sicily to its true heir, Philaster. In the meantime, Philaster allows Pharamond to return to his country and to take Megra away with him. But Megra insists that Arethusa and Bellario, too, should be banished for the supposed illicit love affair between them. To have his daughter "cleared or buried" the king demands that Bellario be stripped and tortured, and here the supposed page reveals "his" identity as Dion's own daughter, Euphrasia, supposed to have gone on a pilgrimage, but actually disguised as a boy to remain in the service of Philaster motivated by a lustless, Platonic love for the prince. Arethusa, however, invites her to continue living with them as servant in their household, and the play ends happily.

This happy ending of **Philaster** seems unconvincing to some critics of Beaumont and Fletcher. They generally complain that it does not emerge naturally and inevitably from the sequence of events of the play, but is rather imposed upon the dénouement. Thus Dora Jean Ashe, for instance, describes it as "The surprise ending, which was soon to become a hallmark of Beaumont and Fletcher's work ..." (Ashe, 1975: xiv), and Alan R. Velie finds that, "... the play is transformed at the last moment from a tragedy to a tragicomedy" (Velie, 1972: 63). Professor Una-Ellis Fermor does not find any essential distinction in tone between tragicomedies as **Philaster** and **A King and No King**, and plays like **The Maid's Tragedy** and **Cupid's Revenge** which, by reason that they do not "want deaths", are classed as tragedies. The critic goes on arguing:

It is, I think, impossible, up to the moment at which Evadne murders the king, to gather from the tone of the play that catastrophe will, in this case, touch the characters instead of, as in **Philaster**, just missing them. (Fermor, 1965: 205).

In his illuminating study of **Philaster**, Professor Andrew Gurr observes that recognition of the same Sidneian design, of **The Maid's Tragedy**, in **Philaster** is complicated by its mood as a tragicomedy, and he significantly adds that:

Beaumont and Fletcher have frequently been condemned for writing plays in which the choice of happy or unhappy ending is merely fortuitous (Gurr, 1973: 1xii).

Even a brief summary of the plot and characters of **Philaster**, as the one attempted in the foregoing pages, would indicate that everything moves towards a happy resolution. The turns which the plot complications assume render themselves easily soluble, so that tension is soon released and a happy ending is appropriate. Evil is circumscribed in the play and is seen reduced to a mere momentary intruder. As Professor Gurr aptly puts it:

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Its evil characters (with the only partial exception of Megra) like those of **Cymbeline** are merely comic, and every unhappy turn of events is followed by a switch to a lighter mood (Gurr, 1973: 1xii).

The predominance of the tragicomic mood and atmosphere in **Philaster** is made possible and plausible by certain themes or aspects introduced in the play, such as the theme of love and politics; the vulnerability to ridicule and exposure of the antipathetic or evil characters, and the dominance of the supreme power of good and justice; the element of misunderstanding and mistaken identity provided by the Bellario-Euphrasia "conceit" modelled on Sidneian design; aspects of comical satire permeating the tragicomedy ; and the effective and decisive role played by the citizens' mutiny at the end of the play. these themes and aspects, put together, reveal an original handling of the genre and the introduction of a number of new conventions.

To start with the blending of the theme of love and politics is made possible, from the opening of the play, by the fact that Philaster's love, Arethusa, is daughter of the king who usurped the throne of Sicily from Philaster. Although this latter's dilemma is made worse by the king's attempt to marry his daughter to Pharamond, Arethusa rejects the unworthy match, stands by the side of right and justice, and declares her love for Philaster. Nor does Arethusa stand alone by the side of the wronged young prince. Lord Dion and other courtiers, too, resent the king's usurpation and tyranny, which obviously contrasts with the antipathetic attitude taken by Polonius and the court to the young prince in **Hamlet**. A glance at the ridiculous and ineffectual Pharamond, bent merely on gratifying his sensual desires, gives the audience the hint that this gull is not capable of gaining Arethusa's love and, as such, will not endanger the relationship between hero and heroine. Dion's and the courtiers' motives, as well as Philaster's own faith in his rightful claim, are so powerful that evil must succumb:

Dion:           The king must please,

    Whilst we know what you are and who you are,  
    Your wrongs and injuries. Shrink not, worthy sir,  
    But add your father to you; in whose name  
    We'll waken all the gods, and conjure up  
    The rods of vengeance,...

(**Philaster**, I.i.307-311)<sup>(4)</sup>

Closely related to the theme of love and politics is the element of misunderstanding and mistaken identity created in the play by the Bellario-Euphrasia "conceit", presumably modelled on Sidneian design. The disguise assumed by Euphrasia provides the play with elements of suspense, emotional intensity, and sensational episodes. It is a dramatic device that contributes to create the romantic, tragicomic atmosphere and

mood as well as to make the happy ending credible. The chaste and disinterested love that Euphrasia bears Philaster, together with her devotion and loyalty to him and to his beloved, points in happy anticipation to the young prince's attainment of both Arethusa's hand and the throne of Sicily.

It is the patterning of a certain situation, then, that matters in this genre of tragicomedy—a situation that has for its basis the triangle involving the hero, the heroine and the supposed page, Bellario.

In his shrewd analysis of the nice meanings of “service” and “servant”, as illustrated in the play, Professor Gurr finds that, “With true service goes being oneself”, and that the amatorious and heroic senses of service in the “conceit” of Bellario show clearly enough the Sidneian design of **Philaster**, and he comes to the conclusion that:

Philaster ultimately attains his honour and becomes himself through his love, especially through Arethusa's constancy and Bellario's selfless devotion: a thematic principle close to Sidney's in the marriage of Arethusa's patience to Philaster's magnanimity (the 'bravery' of his mind) (Gurr, 1973: Ixvi-Ixvii).

One of the remarkable, ingenious aspects of the play is its ending. When the real identity of “Bellario” has been disclosed, as Dion's own daughter Euphrasia, Dion has to admit his false accusation of Arethusa. This false accusation of Bellario and Arethusa, added to reports about Philaster's imprisonment, arouse the citizens' anger at the king who has decided to punish the lovers for having got married. Against the King's tyranny, however, the true heroine stands firmly declaring that “There's nothing that can stir me from myself”, and her selfhood is here read as her decency and honesty.

To the king's disappointment, Pharamond is reported to have been taken prisoner by the citizens and the city is in mutiny in rescue of Philaster:

Dion: [Aside] O brave followers!

Mutiny, my fine dear countrymen, mutiny!  
Now my brave valiant foremen, show your weapons  
In honour of your mistresses!

(v.iii.108-111)

Dion's enthusiasm for seeing justice done and injustice defeated, and the unsophisticated citizens' loyalty to their honest and noble prince show that one of the concerns of **Philaster** is to celebrate gentlemanly honourable conduct. Professor Gurr pays tribute to the dramatists for this achievement in creating this spirit that lies “as a presupposition

behind all the shifts in the hero's situation, and works with love as the arbiter of good conduct through the play":

It was this minute demonstration of the testing of honourable conduct which led to Beaumont and Fletcher's elevation as the formative educational forces behind the Cavalier ethos in Jacobean England (Gurr, 1973;lxvii).

Philaster persuades the citizens to deliver Pharamond to him as his prisoner, and manages to appease them. Once the revelation of the real identity of Bellario is made, Arethusa's virtue and constancy are praised, and Megra's malice is condemned. It is significant that in their triumph, Arethusa, Euphrasia, and Philaster prove themselves to be noble-natured and generous. The two young ladies have the power to pardon those who have wronged them, and Philaster is reconciled with the king who willingly assures the young prince of his right of succession.

This realistic and convincing happy ending, brought about by simple countrymen led by lord Dion, is made more plausible still by the fact that the king will remain king even after having turned over the throne of Sicily to Philaster. It is indeed appropriate to have two kingdoms in the play, as a means,

to avoid the tragic killing-the-king dénouement which would have been inevitable had the usurpation theme been tied to only one throne, as in *Hamlet* (Gurr, 1973: liv).

It has already been mentioned that Sidney's conventions of prose romance are the major motivating power behind *Philaster*, and that the young prince attains his honour and becomes himself through Arethusa's patience and constancy, and also through "Bellario's" selfless devotion to him. Professor Danby criticises the play in terms of "the testing situations, and the poet as teacher" as a popular form for drama suggested by Sidney's great work *Arcadia*. As in the Sidneian universe, there are in *Philaster* two separate but related spheres: the outer world of public events, and the inner world of private affections, "one is heroic, the other amorous":

Patience and magnanimity, like man and woman, are opposite and yet complementary. The supreme perfection will be the marriage of the two.... Perfection will be a co-operative rather than an individual achievement. (Danby, 1965; 51)

Thus Arethusa and Euphrasia are endowed with such great influence that virtually gives this tragicomedy its final shape and dénouement. In this sense one of the new aspects of this play is the celebration of the active role acquired and performed by woman, which has its bearings on the status of woman in the Jacobean society.

Professor Ornstein observes that in the decades following *Tamburlaine*

the heroic vein of tragedy had been so exhaustively worked that dramatists sought new ideas and material. A remarkable development in the later Jacobean tragedies is the shift of the tragic emphasis from hero to heroine, from betrayer to betrayed, and in this direction the contribution made by the dramatists of **The Maid's Tragedy** and **Philaster** is considerable:

No doubt Beaumont and Fletcher's influence helped to turn the drama away from the masculine arenas of politics and history towards the study of intimate, emotional relationships (Ornstein, 1965: 172).

With these personal relationships made prominent in the later Jacobean plays, the dramatists found themselves new subjects to explore which derive their significance and dramatic value from the developing and progressive relations between the sexes. It is indeed striking that the dramatists "discovered the tragic heroine" "at the very time that serious interest was developing outside the drama in the place and role of women in contemporary society" (Ornstein, 1965: 172).

It is ironical that the king in **The Maid's Tragedy** should not believe that Evadne was serious when she declared she was going to kill him, for who would imagine the meek and submissive Gertrude, so to speak, attempting to murder the cunning Claudius? To the king's mind, Evadne is too sweet and gentle to commit the crime of murder. However the contemporary question is implicitly raised in the plays, and sometimes explicitly as in the following soliloquy by Aspatia:

There is a vile dishonest trick in men,  
More than in women. All the men I meet  
Appear thus to me, are all harsh and rude,  
And have a subtlety in everything,  
Which love could never know; but we fond women  
Harbour the easiest and smoothest thoughts.  
And think all shall go so. It is unjust  
That men and women should be match'd together.  
(v.iii.24-31)

It is also significant that the vengeance exacted on the king in this play was not Evadne's own initiative; but it was Melantius who could use his sister as an agent of revenge, and it took him a great while and effort to awaken in her a sense of shame and dishonour. This sense awakened, Evadne turns into a fierce tigress with whom even Lady Macbeth cannot compete, and of whose callous brutality Beatrice falls short.<sup>(5)</sup> No less significant in this respect is Aspatia's duel with Amintor, although the wronged maid undertakes the revenge disguised as her brother.<sup>(6)</sup> What is being stressed in the daring acts performed by Evadne and Aspatia is a

dissatisfaction with the dominant status of the men over the women's and the tyranny of family and social values and conventions.

No less remarkable and novel than the social and moral status of women at the time, are the political bearings the plays, especially **Philaster**, have on the contemporary Jacobean world. The political concerns of the play are evident from the beginning. The king's design to marry his daughter to a Spanish prince, and thus secure his kingdom, is close to actual facts about "several Sicilian kings" who had been dukes of Calabria, and who frequently sought support of a foreign alliance, and their thrones were often seized by force.<sup>(7)</sup>

Beaumont and Fletcher probably exploited resemblances between Sicily and the England of James I, such as **Philaster's** king being a monarch of two recently joined kingdoms who desired closer ties with Spain (Ashe, 1975: xv).

In his standing up to the king of **Philaster** Lord Dion recalls Sir Edward Coke who, for several years, stood very strongly against King James's royal prerogative. The incidents of the contemporary Political situation are explored by Professor Gurr who notes that:

The clash between James and his Lord Chief Justice was no more in itself than an open display of the controversy implicit in James's constitutional position with regard to his subjects in general and particularly the House of Commons from 1607 till 1611, on the relations of government and the law (Gurr, 1973: Iv).

From the contemporary records we understand that although king James dismissed Coke in November 1616, he had already been so upset by the sharp criticism of his personal conduct offered in the Commons, that he had defiantly dissolved his first Parliament in February 1611 (Ashley, 1961 48-51).

The most striking episode in **Philaster**, where the royal prerogatives are being mocked and satirized, occurs when Arethusa has been lost in the woods, and the king, her father, demands that she must be found:

**king:** I do command you all, as you are subjects:  
To show her me! what, am I not your king?  
If ay, then am I not to be obeyed?  
**Dion:** Yes, if you command things possible and honest.  
**king:** Things possible and honest? Hear me thou,  
Thou Traitor, thou darest confine thy king to things  
Possible and honest!

(IV. iv. 32-38)

The presentation of the king as an obstinate tyrant, in the foregoing

lines is ironically set forth in sharp contrast with what will become of him later in the play when he finds himself endangered by the angry countrymen. At that stage of the play his satirical image assumes comic proportions when he sends to Philaster to come and rescue him from his predicament:

Tis Philaster, non but Philaster must allay this heat; they will  
not hear me speak but fling dirt at me and call me tyrant.

(v.iii.155-158)

By virtue of the citizens' honesty the ridiculous Pharamond also receives the most exact punishment. His extravagant indulgence in sensual pleasures exposes him to Arethusa's and even to Galatea's, contempt and, then, his vanity and arrogance make him an easy prey to the mutinous countrymen from whose anger only Philaster saves him. In Pharamond's and Megra's exposure to ridicule, at the end of the play, as vicious and adulterous partners in sin, made certain by the revelation of Bellario's real sex, there is a kind of sophisticated comical satire that is uniquely Beaumont and Fletcher's.

Similarly the whole of the scene that takes place in the woods near the palace, where the king goes hunting with his courtiers, is permeated with a serio-comic tone and episodes. When at moments the scene develops into anything serious or problematical, it is soon brought back into the benign domain of comedy.

In the tragic tone and atmosphere of **The Maid's Tragedy**, there is no such tendency in the action or incidents to resolve themselves peacefully and happily as in **Philaster**. In the tragedy, as has been discussed previously, the tendency is inevitably toward catastrophe as the serious problems created by "honour" seem insoluble.

Yet there is in the **Maid's Tragedy** a curious kind of superb comedy centring on the character of Calianax, father to Aspatia, and the keeper of the king's fortress, in his angry confrontations and quarrels with Melantius. Assuming that Melantius' sister, Evadne, has betrayed his daughter by getting married herself to Amintor, the ill-tempered old man hates the heroic soldier of whom he has always been an enemy. In an angry encounter between the two characters, Calianax calls Melantius "A cut-throat slave, a bloody treacherous slave!" and, in an attempt to show his valiance, he would have fought him, had he had men present to protect him from the soldier's valour:

Calianax [aside]: I would give half my land

That I durst fight with that proud man a little.  
If I had men to hold him, I would beat him  
Till he ask'd me merey.

(III. ii. 35-38)



contrived scenes of such theatrical effectiveness and moral "witty-conceits" that still inspire critics and commentators with new ideas and interpretations.

As this article has been opened with tribute paid to Beaumont and Fletcher by John Dryden, in 1668, it would be appropriate to conclude it with another, perhaps more objective, critical judgement passed, about three centuries later, on the best plays that the dramatists accomplished:

**Philaster** and **The Maid's Tragedy** were supremely successful in their time because they appealed to the sophisticated and unsophisticated alike, to those for whom the theatre was a literary experience and to those who demanded only casual entertainment. As works of the theatre they do not demand close attention but they reward it with dazzling displays of wit. The superficial playgoer finds a world of enchantment, of never-ending surprises and breath-taking suspense, of noble sentiment and thrilling action. The perceptive reader finds beneath the surface enchantment outlines of grotesque or amusing farce, and underworlds of ironic inversions and pathologies calculated to elicit a metaphysical shudder (Ornstein, 1965: 179).

### 1 - Footnotes

1. "The only private theatres in Elizabeth's reign had been served by boy-actors who performed in intensely sophisticated plays". Ian Fletcher, **Beaumont and Fletcher** (London: Writers and Their Work: No.199, Longmans, 1967), p.16.
2. **The Maid's Tragedy**, ed. Howard B. Norland, (London: Regents Renaissance Drama Series, Edward Arnold, 1968). All subsequent references to the play will be made to this edition.
3. - Quoted by Dora Jean Ashe (ed.), **Philaster** (London: Regents Renaissance Drama Series, Edward Arnold, 1975), p.XIX.
4. **Philaster**, ed. Andrew Gurr. London: The Revels Plays, Methuen, 1969 (University Paperback, 1973). All subsequent references to the play will be made to this edition.
5. - In Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's **The Changeling** (1622).
6. - Aspatia however is much less passive than Ophelia in Shakespeare's **Hamlet** (1603).
7. - Quoted from Eugene Waith, the **Pattern of Tragicomedies in Beaumont and Fletcher** (New Haven : 1952, p.15), in **Philaster**, ed. Dora Jean Ashe, 1975, p. XV.

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