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Introduction

Overshadowed in his own day by his flashier mentor and collaborator, John Fletcher, and suffering in more recent times, like all his contemporaries, from unfavourable comparison with Shakespeare, Massinger has never enjoyed a secure reputation as a major dramatist. Considering that he was, along with Ford and Shirley, one of the three most important dramatists of the later Stuart period, the fact of his neglect is somewhat surprising. Part of the cause is no doubt Massinger's own view of his art. The dedications prefixed to his individual plays are self-deprecating, even if we allow for the conventional humility of such documents, and they suggest that Massinger was a dramatist largely by default. As late as 1639, the year before his death, Massinger spoke of the 'necessitous fortunes' that made playwriting his profession.[1] Similarly, whether the reason was reluctance to commit himself to the humble trade of playwright or lack of confidence in his abilities, Massinger's failure to strike out on his own as a dramatist until he was nearly 40 also indicates something less than genuine enthusiasm for his craft. Born in 1583, Massinger appears to have been active as a writer for the stage by the early 1610s, but the first extant plays of his sole authorship date from the 1620s.

If we take *The Maid of Honour* (?1621–2) to be his earliest unaided work,[2] then Massinger had collaborated on no fewer than a dozen plays before venturing to write on his own. Although he may have written non-collaborative plays during these formative years, none survives, and his work with other dramatists, especially Fletcher, regularly went unacknowledged. By about 1616, when Massinger had become a frequent collaborator with Fletcher, the names Beaumont and Fletcher were already inextricably linked, and the popularity of plays like *Philaster* (1609) and *A King and No King* (1611) had resulted in

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their names being associated with plays written by Fletcher and others – Massinger chief among them – long after Beaumont's retirement from the stage in 1613. In fact, of the 35 plays in the 1647 folio of 'Beaumont and Fletcher', Massinger is, according to Cyrus Hoy's disintegrations,[3] responsible for parts of at least 14 plays. The second folio of 1679 adds 3 others in which Massinger had a hand, though he is again unmentioned on the title page. Massinger's friend, Aston Cokayne, took up the dramatist's cause and beginning in 1658 protested the injustice of such omissions,[4] but not until the twentieth century was Massinger given full credit for his extensive collaborative work.

In spite of these uncertain beginnings, Massinger emerged in the 1620s as an important playwright, and in 1625 he succeeded Fletcher as chief dramatist for Shakespeare's company, the King's Men. The bulk of his early collaborations and two early tragedies, *The Duke of Milan* (?1621–2) and *The Unnatural Combat* (?1624–5), were acted by the King's Men, but beginning with *The Maid of Honour*, Massinger wrote a series of tragicomedies and comedies for Christopher Beeston's companies at the Phoenix (or Cockpit) in Drury Lane. The other plays Massinger wrote for Beeston's companies in the early 1620s include *The Bondman* (1623), *The Renegado* and *The Parliament of Love* (1624), and *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (1625). After 1625, however, with the single exception of *The Great Duke of Florence* (1627), another Beeston play, Massinger's name was associated exclusively with the King's company, for which he wrote nearly 20 plays before his death in 1640. The plays extant from this period are *The Roman Actor* (1626), *The Picture* (1629), *Believe As You List* (1631), *The Emperor of the East* (1631), *The City Madam* (1632), *The Guardian* (1633), *A Very Woman* (1634), and *The Bashful Lover* (1636).

Massinger's dramatic output extends beyond these extant plays. His most recent editors credit Massinger with work on 33 surviving plays, 18 of which are collaborations and 15 of which Massinger wrote on his own; including lost works attributable to Massinger, the Clarendon editors count some 55 plays in which he appears to have had a hand.[5] Extracts from the office-book of Sir Henry Herbert, Master of the Revels, record licences for 9 plays by Massinger that are no longer extant. This number is greatly increased if one includes works attributed to Massinger

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More information

in Humphrey Moseley's important entries in the Stationers' Register in 1653 and 1660, whereby he sought to secure copyright for as many as 13 titles neither extant nor mentioned by Herbert. Moseley's credibility is diminished by his ruse of trying to protect two plays for the price of one in his 1653 entry with double titles like 'Alexius the Chast Gallant or The Bashfull Louer.' Moseley's entries are also notorious for misattributions of authorship, among them the assigning of *The Parliament of Love* to Rowley instead of Massinger, but his two entries in the Stationers' Register, even if they contain other such errors, certainly prove that Massinger was a more prolific dramatist than his surviving plays indicate. Philip Edwards and Colin Gibson give a detailed account of the evidence for lost plays in their edition of Massinger, including the horrifying possibility that John Warburton (1682–1759) collected many of them in manuscript, only to have his cook destroy them by using the pages to line pie bottoms.[6]

Massinger was clearly a successful dramatist in the later years of his life, but his popular appeal, even during his heyday in the late 1620s, seems to have been limited, and the commendatory verses attached to editions of individual plays are sometimes less than laudatory. Thomas Jay's contribution to the 1630 edition of *The Picture*, for example, compliments Massinger for not envying the praise accorded Beaumont and Jonson, 'whose worth long since was known/And justly too preferr'd before your own'. On the whole, judging from the bulk of dedicatory poems which are more generous than this one, Massinger seems to have gained some fair popularity, and only once, in the early 1630s, is there clear evidence that he was out of favour with the public.[7] From 1625 until the end of his life, then, Massinger played a significant enough role in the theatre of his day to remain an important figure even when individual plays were not well-received. The closing of the theatres followed soon after Massinger's death, and when they reopened in 1660, he was among the old dramatists whose plays were revived. At least five Massinger plays were performed during the first years after the Restoration: *The Bondman*, by which Pepys was so impressed, *The Renegado*, *The Virgin Martyr*, *A Very Woman*, and *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*.[8]

There was even greater interest in his plays in the eighteenth

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More information

century, in part because they are highly sententious and provided apt material for anthologies like Oldys's *The British Muse* (1738) and, much later, Lamb's *Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets* (1808). With Coleridge's serious, if sometimes unflattering, critical attention to Massinger, and Kean's great successes as Sir Giles Overreach in *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (beginning in 1816), the early nineteenth century showed a general enthusiasm for the dramatist which culminated in Henry Hallam's verdict that 'Massinger, as a tragic writer, appears to me second only to Shakespeare; in the higher comedy, I can hardly think him inferior to Jonson'.[9] From this laudatory assessment of the late 1830s up to the appearance of Philip Edwards and Colin Gibson's edition, *The Plays and Poems of Philip Massinger* (5 vols., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976), little favourable attention was accorded this author, the nadir of whose reputation was no doubt reached when T. S. Eliot found his verse anaemic and held him personally responsible for the dissociation of sensibility that marked the end of the great (metaphysical) period of English literature and the onset of Milton and the baroque.[10]

While the editors of the Clarendon edition did not attempt a critical appraisal of Massinger's plays (their task was clearly a monumental one already), their general introduction does trace in some detail these and other, less extreme differences of opinion about Massinger. One of the virtues of Edwards and Gibson's survey is that it presents both the excessive praise and peremptory dismissal Massinger has inspired over the years with an analytical reserve and detachment on both sides. The Clarendon editors do not take Hallam's encomium as a rallying cry, nor do they feel obliged to counter the provocative, though finally insupportable, accusations of Eliot. Their tacit assumption is that Massinger's plays are artful and self-conscious constructions and as such can be judged on their own merits.

In the almost ten years since the publication of the Clarendon edition, other students of Massinger have begun to build upon Edwards and Gibson's foundation, and there are encouraging signs that Massinger is undergoing, if not an apotheosis, at least a serious critical examination of the sort to which he has never been treated, and of which he has frequently and wrongly been thought unworthy. The first critic to take the appearance of the

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More information

Clarendon edition as an occasion for further study of the dramatist was Anne Barton in her lengthy and comprehensive *TLS* review, 'The Distinctive Voice of Massinger',[11] which, because of its seminal importance, is reprinted as an appendix to this volume. Professor Barton's review not only provided a stimulating look at the entire Massinger canon, but also predicted that the edition under consideration seemed certain 'to spark off a much-needed critical re-evaluation of Massinger's work as a whole'. Another spur to Massinger studies was the decision of Cambridge University Press to issue a one-volume, modern-spelling anthology of *Selected Plays of Philip Massinger* (1978), based on the Clarendon texts and edited by Colin Gibson. This was the first such representative collection of Massinger's works to appear in nearly seventy years, and it was no doubt issued with the expectation that Massinger was about to acquire a wider audience than he had previously known. Other signs of interest in the dramatist include Professor Gibson's work on a book-length survey of critical response to Massinger's work, and a projected Twayne series study by Professor Doris Adler of Howard University.

Although other books on Massinger by individual scholars are certain to appear in the next few years, the present volume of essays provides an occasion for a number of critics and scholars interested in the dramatist to take a collective look at his works and thereby help establish that, *pace* Eliot, Massinger's place in the history of English drama is not yet fully determined. These eight essays grew from a wish to initiate a long-overdue critical reappraisal of Massinger's plays and a desire to commemorate the quatercentenary of the dramatist's birth in 1983, but prior commitments on the part of contributors have meant that the volume itself could not appear in time to mark the anniversary.

A number of different approaches and assessments are contained in these eight essays, but they have in common the wish of their authors to provide a fresh and constructive assessment of Massinger's works. Our collective effort has been directed towards a broad range of subjects, treating major plays as well as important general aspects of Massinger's dramaturgy. We have tried to correct long-held misconceptions about Massinger, as Colin Gibson does in his essay on 'Massinger's Theatrical Language', and we have attempted to explore previously neglected

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areas of the canon, as Cyrus Hoy does in 'Massinger as Collaborator', a detailed study of Massinger's plays with Fletcher and other dramatists. In a third essay on a general topic, 'Massinger's Men and Women', Philip Edwards extends Colin Gibson's arguments about the theatrical effectiveness of Massinger's verbal patterning to recurring dramatic situations in the plays, and in doing so lays to rest long-standing objections that this dramatist's characters lack, in Coleridge's words, 'a guiding point', that we 'never know what they are about'.[12]

Like these essays on broader topics, those on particular plays examine works by Massinger in the light of the whole canon and with a view to their dramatic and historical context. Russ McDonald's study of *The Maid of Honour* shows Massinger's individuality as a writer of tragicomedy and examines his dual inheritance from Shakespeare and Jonson as well as his departure from the Fletcherian norm of tragicomic practice. My essay on 'Massinger's Political Tragedies' sees *The Roman Actor* and *Believe As You List* as evidence of Massinger's increased political involvement in the Caroline period and of his shift towards more appropriate subject matter for tragedy than he had hit upon in his earlier plays. Martin Butler's study, 'Romans in Britain', also focuses upon *The Roman Actor*, but it examines the play in the context of other classical plays of the 1620s and '30s, thereby establishing Massinger's role in the intellectual and political ferment that eventually led to civil war.

The volume concludes with new studies of Massinger's best-known plays, his two satiric comedies. Nancy Leonard offers a tantalizingly original perspective on *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* in her essay, 'Overreach at Bay', and Michael Neill deepens our understanding of the social implications of *The City Madam* in 'The Tongues of Angels', his study of the theme of charity in Massinger's play.

NOTES

1 Dedication to *The Unnatural Combat* (1639).
2 Philip Edwards dates the play *c.*1621–2 in *The Plays and Poems of Philip Massinger*, ed. Philip Edwards and Colin Gibson (5 vols., Oxford Clarendon Press, 1976), vol. 1, pp. 105–6. All dates for Massinger's plays given here are those established by the Clarendon editors.
3 See Hoy's series of articles, 'The Shares of Fletcher and his Collaborators

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in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon', *Studies in Bibliography*, 8 (1956), 129–46; 9 (1957), 143–62; 11 (1958), 85–106; 12 (1959), 91–116; 13 (1960), 77–108; 14 (1961), 45–67; 15 (1962), 71–90.

4 Cokayne addresses the publishers of the 1647 folio directly in '*To Mr.* Humphrey Mosley, *and Mr.* Humphrey Robinson', one of the verses in his book, *A Chain of Golden Poems*. See Edwards and Gibson, vol. 1, p. xix.

5 Edwards and Gibson, vol. 1, p. xxvii.

6 Edwards and Gibson, vol. 1, pp. xxvi–xxvii.

7 See the 'Prologue at the Blackfriars' written for *The Emperor of the East* (1631) and the Prologue to *The Guardian* (1633); the matter is discussed in Edwards and Gibson, vol. 1, pp. xl–xlii.

8 Edwards and Gibson, vol. 1, p. xlvii.

9 Edwards and Gibson, vol. 1, p. lxiii.

10 T. S. Eliot, 'Philip Massinger', in *Selected Essays* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964), p. 187.

11 Anne Barton, 'The Distinctive Voice of Massinger', *TLS* (20 May 1977), pp. 623–4, reprinted as an appendix in this volume.

12 Edwards and Gibson, vol. 1, p. lx.

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Massinger's Theatrical Language

COLIN GIBSON

FOR MORE THAN three hundred and fifty years the merits and demerits of the language of Massinger's plays have been debated by theatregoers, poets, professional critics and general readers. Massinger's dramatic style has never excited the praise lavished on Shakespeare's writing, against which his work is usually measured, nor has it received an equal share in the general modern admiration for the poetic language of the greatest Elizabethan and Stuart dramatists.

Edmund Gosse, one of Massinger's severest critics, wrote:

> If the truth be told, Massinger is scarcely a poet, except in the sense in which that word may be used of any man who writes seriously in dramatic form. What we delight in in the earlier Elizabethans, the splendid bursts of imaginative insight, the wild freaks of diction, the sudden sheet-lightning of poetry illuminating for an instant dark places of the soul, all this is absent in Massinger. He is uniform and humdrum; he has no lyrical passages; his very versification, as various critics have observed, is scarcely to be distinguished from prose, and often would not seem metrical if it were printed along the page. Intensity is not within his reach, and even in the aims of composition we distinguish between the joyous instinctive lyricism of the Elizabethans, which attained to beauty without much design, and this deliberate and unimpassioned work, so plain and easy and workmanlike.[1]

Modern critics like T. S. Eliot and Massinger's biographer T. A. Dunn, agreeing with Gosse that the dramatist's work lacks the marks of absolute poetic genius, have specified other charges. Not only is there an absence of striking phrases; Massinger's diction suffers from a blight of abstraction, a general enervation. His style betrays a fatal separation of thought and feeling from immediate sense experience. The feebleness of his imagination is said to be evidenced by his habit of self-repetition, and by the borrowings he makes from other dramatists. Massinger's style is characteristically eloquent and long-winded; his convoluted periodic sentences make delivery difficult even for intelligent and

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experienced actors. In short, as an earlier critic reviewing Gifford's 1805 edition of Massinger's plays wrote:

> Massinger's talents appear to have been better fitted by nature for heroic than dramatic writing: he excels in dignified scenes; he describes both character and passion with skill; but is unable to give them appropriate language and expression: he is eloquent, indeed, in every species of description; but his flowing, stately periods, are perhaps too lofty for the stage, and contribute to render his plays heavy and wearisome to the reader.[2]

Of course Massinger has his supporters, numbering among them poets, critics and men of the theatre. C. H. Terrot's opinion that 'Blank verse is upon the whole much more difficult to write than any of our rhyming measures. The best example of its Tragic form is Massinger',[3] is not likely to find much sympathy today, but the dramatist's stage-poetry has been praised in less extreme terms by George Colman, Lamb, Coleridge, Thomas Campbell, Keats, Hallam, Beddoes, Elton and Swinburne. Like T. S. Eliot's more famous piece, John Middleton Murry's critique of Massinger's style in *The Problem of Style* (London, 1922) acknowledges some considerable merits – 'The odd thing is that this blank verse is really excellent prose – lucid, well shaped, and sinewy. Massinger's sentence-management (as Coleridge noted) is beautiful' – and modern critics like L. C. Knights and Anne Barton have written sympathetically of the dramatist's handling of his medium.

Still, the counterview is weightily supported, detailed and widely held. A single essay could scarcely hope to address all its aspects, let alone overthrow it. But it may be possible to turn the flank of the attack a little by insisting on something that is self-evident but frequently ignored. Massinger wrote for the theatre; his language, poetical or not, is theatrical, and by considering its working in the fuller context of the stage it may be possible to identify qualities, even virtues, easily missed if the text is read as though it were a long narrative poem.

It is a curious fact that the critical debate about Massinger's stage language has largely been conducted by readers. And since performances of the plays other than *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* have been few and isolated (in the present century only *The Duke of Milan* at Merton College, Oxford, in 1923; *The City Madam* at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in 1964; and *The Roman Actor* at the Bouwerie Lane Theatre, New York, in 1980,

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and at the Glasgow Citizens Theatre in 1982), even when those readers have been habitual playgoers and in some cases practising dramatists there has been little opportunity to confirm impressions or test readings against the actualities of stage production. It is of course possible to imagine a stage production, even to visualize a performance while reading the words. But no such theatre of the mind is likely to reproduce the stream of local and particular aural, visual, emotional and mental impressions which constitute the experience of the playgoer watching a performance by live actors.

Unlike the theatre audience, a reader is in complete personal control of the scanning process. He can repeatedly scrutinize a line, a passage of dialogue or a whole scene, or skim over what fails to interest him. He can virtually reassemble the given text by reading its parts in a chronological order different from that established by the author. He is able to anticipate and digress; or suspend the reading process in order to consult other sources of information. The two or three hours' traffic of the stage becomes a time span of indeterminate length. The particular theatrical representation is replaced by a free imaginative experience, richer or poorer by the measure of what the solitary reader brings to the reading.

The playgoer cannot count images, compare at will different parts of the play, track down sources or objectify at leisure his response to the play in progress. He must attend to the words, sounds, images and experiences as they are projected by the actors in the temporal sequence determined by the playwright. And his individual reaction may be modified or even overridden by the collective response of the group of which he is a member.

Given such a major shift from a stage audience to a reading public of the kind which took place after the closing of the theatres in 1642, the little surviving evidence for contemporary response to Massinger's theatrical language assumes special interest.

Unfortunately there is no direct evidence of a theatregoer's response to a Massinger play. If a latter-day Simon Forman ever sat on a Blackfriars bench and watched a performance of *The Duke of Milan* or *The Roman Actor* his journal entry is still to be found. But there is strong circumstantial evidence of popular favour in the fact of Massinger's selection to succeed Shakespeare

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