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JOHNSON, THOMAS PENN. A Revaluation of the Serious Thematic Concerns of Three Plays of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher as They Are Revealed in Character Development. (1967) Directed by: Dr. J.A. Bryant. pp. 63.

Twentieth-century critical assessment of the works of Beaumont and Fletcher usually ranges from charges of decadence to immorality. Modern critics have posited psychological interpretations, maintaining that Beaumont and Fletcher sacrifice plot and character development for the sake of emotional rhetoric and dramatic situations designed to produce maximum audience response. Chapter One of this study seeks to demonstrate that there is an alarming inconclusiveness about the judgment of modern critics. The intention of the entire study is to show how the internal evidence of three plays supports them as serious and creditable, though minor, works of art and overthrows the basic charges of modern criticism against them. In the opinion of this writer Beaumont and Fletcher do give careful attention to character and thematic development and their works do contribute significant insights into the nature of man and his struggle in the universe.

The central movement of Philaster can be seen in the development of the characters. The major characters--Philaster, King, and Dion--become aware of their human fallibility. The characters come to see themselves and events of their confused state as evidence of an essential and universal human imperfection. In this action is the serious concern of the play.

In a typically Fletcherian manner, the denouement of A King and No King presents a surprising turn of events. After Arbaces has decided to commit the sin of incest, he discovers that Panthea is not his sister, that he is not really of royal birth, and that marriage to Panthea will enable him to remain king. The fortunate turn of events does

not eliminate the fact that Arbaces had determined to sin. Only in token does the denouement affirm the moral code on incest and kingship. The Jacobean doubts about absolute values are held in abeyance. But the irony and absurdity of such token affirmation must have been devastatingly obvious to Jacobean theater-goers.

The Maid's Tragedy presents the concerns that were typically Beaumont and Fletcher's more skillfully and effectively than the other plays. Here the use of polaric tensions became the unifying principle for the several areas of development--character, plot, narrative. Practically all the characters in the play are caught in a moral dilemma. All the characters, except Amintor, "break word with Heaven". The movement of the play suggests that the characters' abandoning of the old moral order and following personal standards can only lead to chaos. But the plays final affirmation of the old order cannot cause the audience to forget that the old order precipitated the necessity of one absurd choice after another. In a sense, the fabric of the old society has been irrevocably torn.

The plays discussed in this study strike at the heart of the general Jacobean uncertainty. Beaumont and Fletcher's desire to probe the mysteries of the human mind led them to write about the doubts of their age. They gave their audience a confusion of the tragic and comic spirits which was simultaneously a nostalgic remembrance and a rejection of the conventions and beliefs which they imply.

A REVALUATION OF THE SERIOUS THEMATIC CONCERNS
OF THREE PLAYS OF FRANCIS BEAUMONT AND JOHN FLETCHER
AS THEY ARE REVEALED IN CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

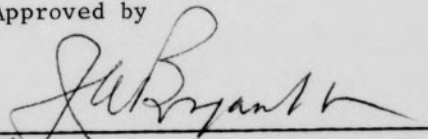
by

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CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

Twentieth-century critics have been virtually unanimous in their interpretation and estimation of the works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher. Critical assessment usually ranges from charges of decadence to immorality, with occasional attempts to explain the decadence as a concomitant and reflection of the decadence of the Jacobean era. Hardly ever throughout the writings of these critics do the plays of our Cavalier poets receive enthusiastic acclaim; critics do not see them as great plays in the sense that they contribute any significant insights into the nature of man and his struggle in the universe. The appraisal of twentieth-century critics stands in stark contrast to the impressive tribute bestowed upon these two playwrights by early seventeenth-century poets and critics in the "Commendatory Verses" of the First Folio of 1647.

The general modern critical disfavor and the primary tenets of recent interpretation have roots in the criticism of the latter part of the seventeenth century, particularly in an essay of John Dryden. John Dryden, who, by reason of his strong neo-classical predilections, disdained the "impurity" of tragicomedy, the mode of Beaumont and Fletcher, suggested that the beauties of their work might lie "in the lively touches of the passion."¹ Dryden, however, did allow that the "imperfect plots" of Beaumont and Fletcher could raise "some faint emotions of pity and terror" in us. But modern critics have been inclined to posit

¹Essays of John Dryden, ed. W.P. Ker (Oxford, 1926), I, 212.

psychological interpretations, maintaining that there is an exploitation of the audience's emotions--interpretations which the phrase "lively touches of the passion" would seem to imply.

The concern of this study (and particularly this first chapter) is not primarily to refute recent critics, but to suggest that there is an alarming inconclusiveness about their judgment--alarming superficially because of the original popularity of Beaumont and Fletcher's works, a popularity, which in the eyes of Jacobean theater-goers and playwrights, was as great and deserved as Shakespeare's. And using the neo-classical logic of John Dryden: "Since we acknowledge the effect, there must be something in the cause." Modern critics are unconvincing, moreover, because of flaws in their basic tenets, which become more easily discernible when their principles are applied in analysis of the plays. More important, however, it is the intention of this study to demonstrate that the evidence of the plays themselves supports them as creditable, though minor, works of art and overthrows the basic charges of modern criticism against them. After the main approaches of modern criticism are identified and suggested to be inconclusive in this first chapter, the way will be clearer for a more extensive analysis of three Beaumont and Fletcher plays. There is not enough space, of course, to give detailed analysis of each critic, but in order to indicate the direction of this study, major commentary will be given in the discussion of one critic, Professor Arthur Mizener, whose short article can conveniently (and properly) serve as the epitome of much recent criticism.

The unanimity of the critics derives from one fundamental contention: plot, character, and themes are unimportant in that they are secondary to something else. The tone of this observation becomes progressively derogatory as the twentieth century grows older. Professor A.H. Thorndike, an early critic of this century, whose appraisal of Beaumont and Fletcher is more benign than most, claims that their plays "depend for interest not on their observation or revelation of human nature, or the development of character, but on the variety of situations, the clever construction that holds the interest through one suspense to another up to the unravelling at the very end, and on the naturalness, felicity, and vigor of the poetry."² It is important to note here that Professor Thorndike's choice of words is most fortunate, for, though he attached no particular suggestiveness to the phrase "interest depends", that phrase in the framework of his positive criticism becomes important in indicating the tone and direction of this study. For Professor Thorndike did not disallow the possibility of "observation or revelation of human nature"; his emphasis, rather, is that interest depends on a variety of situations. The plays, however, aim at something beyond interest.

The charge of Professor Lawrence B. Wallis carries a more scornful tone. He charges that the plots of the plays are not only insignificant but "sadly culpable for their improbabilities and exaggerations." He contends that plotting was important to Beaumont and Fletcher chiefly

²The Maid's Tragedy and Philaster, by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, Belles-Letres Series, III (Boston, 1906), p. xx.

as "the carefully dove-tailed framework upon which an elaborate emotional tapestry could be woven."³ If plot structures are purely a means to an end, then critical disdain is justified. And if "characterization, probability, actuality, and ethical value" are indeed "sacrificed" (a word which carries ignominious implications), as Mr. Frank H. Ristine claimed, then the scorn of those who respect the unsullied products of honest poets is understandable.⁴

Two main streams of complementary interpretations are identifiable as emerging from the basic premise that plot and character are secondary in Beaumont and Fletcher's works. The first interpretative approach to be discussed here may be called the psychological interpretation, which would explain that our playwrights' method and language are oriented purposefully for the exploitation of audience emotions. Miss Ellis-Fermor, whose volume The Jacobean Drama (1936) seems to have influenced practically all subsequent criticism, is a representative of this school of thought when she describes the method or organizing principle in Beaumont and Fletcher plays:

They give us the crucial situations...which introduce clearly the conflict between two views on kingship, and let it be debated to and fro, sometimes on a running series of scenes..., the problem resolving itself into a series of points set over against each other; private honour against public loyalty, reverence for the monarch against hatred of the man, the right of the individual against the demands of the State.⁵ (My italics)

³Fletcher, Beaumont and Company (Morningside Heights, N.Y., 1942), p. 207.

⁴English Tragicomedy Its Origin and History (New York, 1963), p. 111.

⁵Una M. Ellis-Fermor, The Jacobean Drama (London, 1936), p. 224.

According to Miss Ellis-Fermor, Beaumont and Fletcher are not concerned that this technique be the vehicle for profound resolutions.

Miss Ellis-Fermor has described the way of the world of the plays. "The unique quality of this world," according to Professor Eugene M. Waith, a principal exponent of the psychological interpretation, "is projected by a brand of emotional rhetoric which is perfectly adapted to the artifices of character and situation."⁶ It is not at all surprising that such a highly dramatic method should have as its vehicle highly emotional rhetoric. That the "series of points set over against each other" and the emotional rhetoric exist can be no point of argument. But whether Waith is right that "the poetry of every major scene is a brilliant solution to a rhetorical problem" remains to be seen and discussed. It is this method and vehicle which become important objects of analysis in this interpretation. But the principal object of analysis in this interpretation is the audience's response to the method and rhetoric. Waith describes the nature of that response: "We respond to the relationships between them [characters] in a given situation, but the response does not depend on our having looked at these characters in the same way in preceding scenes. It is a response to the emotion itself--a response which may even be heightened when the characters are presented in a strange new light."⁷ But critics are quick to point out that to abandon the structural use of plot and to minimize the development of character for the sake of dramatic effect is to create spurious emotional response.

⁶The Pattern of Tragicomedy in Beaumont and Fletcher (New Haven, 1952), p. 24.

⁷Waith, p. 34.

Without the unification which is made possible by carefully planned plot development and widening character dimensions, the resulting emotional response is considered ugly. Accordingly, for example, Miss M.C. Bradbrook designates the basis of Beaumont and Fletcher plays as "an outrageous stimulation."⁸ Even Waith, who, essentially positive as a critic, seeks primarily to analyze--not scorn--the method of Fletcherian tragicomedy, is led to assert that Beaumont and Fletcher deliberately play with the most serious issues. His contention is that our playwrights' method, which makes use of sudden changes and the disappearance of one issue to make way for another, amounts to a "game played with consummate skill."⁹

Two parenthetical notes in criticism of the line of argument of which Bradbrook and Waith are exemplars ought to be added here. It is a dubious contention that an audience to whom the issues in a play are serious and immediate would tolerate--let alone welcome--such "deliberate playing". It is more conceivable, however, that the audience would allow dramatic treatment of serious issues which was ostensibly playing, but at the same time, because of its sensitivity to the issues, the audience would regard the aura of superficiality as a penetrating ironic analysis of the issues. It is a probability, which this study will explore, that Beaumont and Fletcher realized the possibilities of this latter approach and that in their "playing" they are raising some serious questions which the audience of their day was raising also. And what is more, some of the audience knew what our playwrights were doing.

⁸Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy (Cambridge, 1935), p. 247.

⁹Waith, p. 42.

Secondly, there are those like Professor Robert Ornstein who would claim that Waith's intended praise of Beaumont and Fletcher's ability to exploit emotions is indeed no praise at all. Ornstein argues: "Those who praise its [a play] emotional rhythm succeed only in begging the question of seriousness in art; for if we applaud Beaumont's ability to play upon his audience's emotional responses, how can we condemn a modern sentimentalist who exploits purer sentiments--our love of puppies or our memories of puppy love?"¹⁰

There is yet a more serious charge which arises from consideration of Beaumont and Fletcher's method. This is the charge that preoccupation with a variety of situations and theatrical effect led our playwrights to make no attempt to resolve issues, that is, in terms of the traditional dramatic movement of a play. This charge is more serious because it is a charge of superficiality and, as Ornstein pointed out, it raises the question of seriousness in art. Recent criticism has been especially stern in this regard. Professor Irving Ribner claims about Beaumont and Fletcher: "There is no real quest for moral certainty in their plays, only the facile reduction of artificially contrived paradoxes, with no attempt to resolve moral issues."¹¹ Mr. T.B. Tomlinson's criticism is subtly scathing when he writes: "Beaumont and Fletcher have a lightness of touch which is often irresponsible and trifling, but which for the most part also has the negative virtue of not pretending to deal in more than surface impressions."¹² And T.S. Eliot, a twentieth-century critic

¹⁰The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy (Madison, 1960), p. 173.

¹¹Jacobean Tragedy (New York, 1962), p. 16.

¹²A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy (Cambridge, 1964), p. 243.

whose essays are inescapable in Elizabethan and Jacobean studies, calls the evocative quality of our playwrights' verse "hollow" and "superficial"; he turns the succinctness of one of his metaphors--amazingly cryptic as they are--against them: "Looking closer, we discover that the blossoms of Beaumont and Fletcher's imagination draw no sustenance from the soil, but are cut and slightly withered flowers stuck into sand."¹³

Any attempt to evaluate the achievement of our playwrights must reckon with these charges. Since these charges derive from discussion of Beaumont and Fletcher's method, a second look at that method is warranted. No better discussion of that method as interpreted by those who lean toward the psychological interpretation can serve as the basis of discussion here than Professor Arthur Mizener's article "The High Design of A King and No King."

In Professor Mizener's words, "Beaumont and Fletcher's aim was to generate in the audience a patterned sequence of responses, a complex series of feelings and attitudes so stimulated and related as to give each its maximum effectiveness and yet to keep all in harmonious balance."¹⁴ In the same article he suggests: "It is probably at least in part because Beaumont and Fletcher constructed the narrative so carefully as a means of supporting and enriching the emotional form that critics have been unable to suppose it was the end, the ultimate ordering form, and not merely a means, in their plays." (page 136.) It is not evident that Professor Mizener was aware of the devastating reversibility of this observation. To build an interpretation around an argument which in

¹³Selected Essays 1917-1932 (New York, 1932), p. 135.

¹⁴Mod. Philol., XXXVIII (1940-41), 135.

reversal might be used against one's own is at best risky. The point is that one could just as well argue that Beaumont and Fletcher constructed the emotional form so carefully as a means of supporting and enriching the narrative that Mr. Mizener has been unable to suppose it was the end. The implications of this suggestion will be explored later in this study.

Another reservation about Professor Mizener's interpretation is worthy of mention, though it is very general and inconclusive. To claim that Beaumont and Fletcher directed all the resources of their plays to the induction of complexes of emotions is to make of these playwrights Cavalier pornographers. Where is the poetic compulsion to express one's response to complexities of nature and of man? According to Professor Mizener, it too has been sacrificed to stage effect. Though Professor Mizener does not go so far as to say it, it would seem accurate, in view of traditional understanding of the poet's concerns, to maintain that if Beaumont and Fletcher's sole concern was the arrangement of responses, they were not really true to themselves nor to their art. Accordingly, aesthetic critics would be justified in dismissing them altogether. But certainly that was not the response of the critics and poets of their own time. The popularity and durability of their work invite reevaluation.

The second identifiable interpretation which emerges from the contention that plot and character are secondary is that Beaumont and Fletcher provide only discussion of tragic issues, and no great research into human nature. This charge is a part of the one previously discussed, but it is singled out here for purposes of expanded treatment. In the words of Miss Ellis-Fermor this charge is that "the great questions [those

touching the meaning of life and the destiny of man] rest untouched except as debating topics." The issues touched are serious but there is no sense of bitterness or horror, and "the world is becoming a cloud-cuckoo-land of pathos, tender or poignant sentiment, noble reflexions and fairy-tale adventures. The end is saved from catastrophe by a mood that gave us clearly to know from the outset that catastrophe was never really imminent."¹⁵ So serious is this charge, it would seem, in view of the traditional nature of drama that it is incumbent upon any positive critic to reckon with it. Miss Ellis-Fermor, however, made her comments without venom; even though she did call our playwrights "irresponsible," she intended to describe by it that creative imagination which produces romances and fairy tales. The lack of harshness in Miss Ellis-Fermor's criticism is explained by her belief that Beaumont and Fletcher's evasion of serious issues can be attributed to response to the mood of the time. About that mood she writes:

This mood [spiritual defeat], culminating as it did in about the year 1605, took the form for public and private men alike of a sense of impending fate, of a state of affairs so unstable that great or sustained effort was suspended for a time and a sense of the futility of man's achievement set in.¹⁶

According to Miss Ellis-Fermor the works of Beaumont and Fletcher seek a means of escape from an age of unsteadiness, ushered in by the loss of a great Queen, the ascendancy of the unpopular James, and general

¹⁵Ellis-Fermor, p. 26.

¹⁶Ellis-Fermor, p. 2.

loss of former dignity and glory. Theirs is an escape from "the tyranny of Jacobean incertitude", a "withdrawal from the pursuit of reality" to the creation of a "middle mood" in which tragedy threatens without materializing, where evil is more an atmosphere than a real force.¹⁷

But some astute critics, for various reasons, have been unable to accept the "escape theory". Professor Robert Ornstein doubts "that Fletcher's audience felt any need to escape the burden of tragic thought, because that burden was felt only by a few gifted dramatists and shared by their audiences only for some brief hours in the theaters."¹⁸

John Danby argues strenuously that our playwrights confront the feeling of dislocation rather than seek to escape it. He writes: "He [Beaumont] achieves something more important than mere surprises, more significant than stage-tricks; something which has to do with his feeling for radical dislocation--a dislocation which can express itself in incongruities macabre, comic, or harrowing as the occasion demands."¹⁹ In Danby's opinion, and in the opinion of this writer, "Beaumont is wrongly understood if his greatest scenes are dismissed with the formula that everything here is sacrificed to situation." Beaumont's personalities, though people, are not characters; they cannot be unified; they are irrevocably fragmented by the choices they have to make. "And if our poets do not reveal the depths or complexities of human nature," wrote Professor Thorndike, "they have the power of rising to a situation and of expressing

¹⁷Ellis-Fermor, pp. 3, 201-204 passim.

¹⁸Ornstein, p. 164.

¹⁹John F. Danby, Poets on Fortune's Hill (London, 1952), p. 189.

dramatic action."²⁰ The truth of the matter is that they rise so brilliantly to a situation that we are prone to minimize the poignancy of their revelation of the complexities of human nature. What they see in human nature and their society, as revealed in their plays, is not unlike what Aristophanes depicted in The Clouds and what contemporary movies (e.g. Divorce American Style) present. These works of art present a confusion of tragedy and comedy. The Clouds is funny, but the ascendancy of the new immoral philosophy championed by Socrates ends in general chaos and perverted family relationships; the characters laugh at the old moral principles which were espoused by the generation of men who fought at Thermopylae, but consideration of the existing state of chaos and remembrance of the glory of Thermopylae make that laughter painful. In a contemporary movie, alimony-burdened husbands are laughed at by the audience, but deep down in its heart, the audience is not sure that what it sees is comedy. The intention of this study is to demonstrate that Beaumont and Fletcher were concerned with similar kinds of tensions in their society and in man.

The contention of this study is that the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher are organized around hyperbole and conceit (as Mr. Danby suggests), an emotional form which allows for the highest dramatic effect, but that the plays also have an equally important narrative structure--both of which principles of organization combine here to yield profound insights into the complexities of the Jacobean world and human nature.

²⁰Thorndike, p. xxix.

CHAPTER II - PHILASTER

Philaster, or Love Lies A-Bleeding (ca. 1609) was probably the first play of the Beaumont and Fletcher collaboration that brought great success to the playwrights. The play is typically Fletcherian.²¹ Like most Beaumont and Fletcher plays Philaster conducts us to a far away kingdom (here Calabria, rather than Aracadia or Ilyria) which serves as an appropriate region for the intrigues of love and high ideals of honor to be presented. Allowing that John Fletcher's description of tragicomedy in the note to the reader appended to The Faithful Shepherdess is an adequate one, Philaster is undoubtedly a tragicomedy inasmuch as it "wants deaths, which is enough to make it no tragedy, yet brings some near it, which is enough to make it no comedy." The dramatic situations are abundant, and therefore, invite commentary, but it is the purpose here especially to discuss the play with a view to thematic and character development.

The first scene of the play is pervaded by several characteristics of tragedy in the Elizabethan manner. There are repeated references to Philaster, the wronged prince, and the usurpation of the throne by the ruling king. One dialogue between three lords, who remain prominent throughout the play, reveals the tone of fear which permeates the scene:

²¹The use of Fletcher's name to form an adjective does not intend to indicate that Fletcher is the more important member of the partnership. The adjective refers to both playwrights; its form is a matter of convenience.

Thra. This will be hardly done.
 Cle. It must be done, if it be done.
 Dion. When 'tis at best, 'twill be but half done,
 Whilst so brave a gentleman's wrong'd and flung off.
 Thra. I fear.
 Cle. Who does not?
 Dion. I fear not for myself, and yet I fear too:
 Well, we shall see, we shall see. No more.
 (I. i. 122-129)²²

The tone of this dialogue (and the entire first scene) is dread, not unlike the dread apparent in the opening scene of Hamlet. In that play too there is a wronged prince, who eventually did overthrow the usurping king, and a new health and renewed Divine favor embodied in Fortinbras were restored to the kingdom. The first scene also presents the first confrontation between the King and Philaster. It is an angry encounter. The role of Dion as commentator on the political situation is established as he alerts the audience to the implications of the remarks:

See, how his fancy labours! Has he not
 Spoke home and bravely? what a dangerous train
 Did he give fire to! how he shook the King,
 Made his soul melt within him, and his blood
 Run into whey! (I. i. 303-307)

The tone of this speech and scene is reminiscent of the dramatic foreshadowings in Elizabethan tragedies. According to the conventions of tragedy that the audience knew, there would be an inherent suggestion here that the temperaments and destinies of the King and Philaster will force them to an impasse, an eventual intersection of fortunes, which

²²Citations from Philaster in my text are to The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, A.H. Bullen, Variorum Edition (London, 1904), Vol. I.

will result in death and some kind of redemption of the unnatural state of affairs.

In Philaster, however, the would-be Hamlet never reaches full blossom; death and tragedy are averted. This is not strictly a revenge play in the tradition of The Spanish Tragedy and Hamlet; yet the first scene would suggest to the Jacobean audience, which was accustomed to the conventions of Elizabethan tragedy, that Beaumont and Fletcher were sending this play in the direction of other tragedies.

The first scene also serves to introduce themes and problem areas of concern. In this regard the most significant introduction is the spheres in which "the absolutes manifest themselves"--politics and romance.²³ The commentaries on the happenings at court come from the lords, who are interested in political winds, and the ladies who are interested in romance and love. The political state of affairs and the affairs of romance are linked when, for example, the most heated dialogue of the King, Philaster, and Pharamond is interrupted momentarily by the attendant ladies' discussion of the merit of each gentleman.²⁴ Throughout the play the affairs of both spheres affect each other. While deliberating Philaster's delay in summoning the rage of the people to his advantage, Dion reports in Act III that "The only cause that draws Philaster back/ From this attempt is the fair princess' love". And for the good of the kingdom Dion seeks to confute that love. The King repents of his crimes after discovering that his daughter has been betrayed by Pharamond, her intended husband. He interprets this shame

²³Danby, Poets on Fortune's Hill, p. 167.

²⁴See I. i. 241-248.

on his house as divine retribution for his usurpation (II. iv. 56-69). Philaster, falsely thinking that the princess Arethusa is unfaithful to him, renounces his right to the throne because there is no joy in ruling a land wherein the women have no virute (III. ii. 105-128). In Act IV Philaster again echoes the theme that defilement of the court is inseparably linked with defilement of women, and he regrets both the right to the crown and the love of courtly women. This interweaving of the events of the two spheres is evidence of an attempt at structural unity and a concern for thematic development.

The Character of Philaster and the King

The world of Philaster is more than a world of dramatic situations; it is also a world of characters, important and complex. The artistic treatment of Philaster's character has occasioned some of the sternest charges that Beaumont and Fletcher were not true to themselves, that they sacrificed character development to the creation of pathetic situations which would extract maximum audience response. The seriousness of this charge can be seen in the comments of Professor J.H. Schutt, who charged that our playwrights "lacked the moral strength to resist the temptation of satisfying audiences whose literary tastes are of necessity crude, and what was worse they deliberately pandered to the prurient appetites of high and low."²⁵ It is consideration of Philaster's character which prompts this accusation from Professor Schutt. But a close look at this approach when applied to specific sections of the play reveals serious loopholes.

²⁵"Philaster Considered as a Work of Literary Art," English Studies, VI (1924), 82.

When Philaster is informed (falsely) that Arethusa has been carrying on an illicit affair with her page Bellario, he becomes insanely jealous. He baits Arethusa into discussing Bellario, and she is innocently frank in her responses; but he is inflamed all the more. Schutt believed that Arethusa's frankness should have disarmed so astute a man as Philaster is represented to be in the first two acts. "Thus we again come to the conclusion," wrote Professor Schutt, "that what dominated in the minds of the poets was the creation of a pathetic situation: two lovers parting."²⁶ It is not necessarily true, however, that Arethusa's frankness should have disarmed Philaster nor that Philaster is represented to be a flawless man in the first two acts. First it is understandable that a man manly and bold for his rights should be violent in his reaction to the slightest suggestion of an affront to that manliness. Furthermore, it ought to fall into immediate suspect to contend that skillful playwrights would leave the dramatic development completely without justification. We should remember that even from the first scene of the play we have been repeatedly warned by Dion and the other lords that the citizens are not the best judges of political things. Surely, then, the hero of the people is immediately suspect of some faults. Professor Schutt thought there was a fundamental mistake here in the development of Philaster's character:

If we are to understand his behavior to Arethusa later on, we must be deeply convinced of one grave flaw in his character: he is suspicious and capable of blind jealousy.

²⁶Schutt, p. 84.

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 In our play we hear of Philaster's suspiciousness and jealousy only in the first scene of the third act, after Dion has told him that he caught Arethusa with her boy.

.
 Philaster's outburst is hollow rhetoric all the same; there is too much thunder and devils in it to move us really. It is not Philaster speaking here, but it is Philaster who is made to say certain words that the situation seems to require and the audience will applaud.²⁷

Beaumont and Fletcher, however, might have been developing the play from the beginning in a direction which Professor Schutt fails to consider. Clearly the authors sought to convince the audience initially that Philaster deserved the throne by lineage and by virtue of his manly character. And it is consistent with the general uncertainty that pervaded the Jacobean Age, when the requisites and rights of kingship were not clear, that later in the play a doubt should be raised as to whether the rightful and deserving king was indeed deserving at all.

Because of our knowledge of the conventions of tragedy, we, along with the Jacobean audience, are comfortable with the play at the beginning; we have seen this situation before: a usurping king has deprived a good prince of his throne. We anticipate how the play will end: presumably the rightful king will assert his best nature, and the unlawful king will be thrown down. But deep down in the Jacobean audience's heart there was no strong identity with the moral order which produced the kind of expectancies described above. It was no longer the age of Elizabeth--the age of the defeat of the Spanish Armada, surge of nationalism, and worship of the court. This was the age of an unpopular

²⁷Schutt, p. 83.

foreign sovereign who insisted on the claim of Divine Right and whose court was notoriously corrupt. To speak out new moral and political doubts and grievancies, however, was treasonable, and there was an almost insurmountable difficulty involved in trying to understand or formalize abstruse problems and doubts in an age of rapid and profound transitions. But there was nothing to prevent exposure and analysis of these doubts on the stage. The sudden revelation of faults in the character of the rightful heir creates a situation in which doubts about the old moral order are explored, and the audience is allowed to indulge in them, while still appearing to hold the old order dear.

If there were only one identifiable fault in Philaster's nature, the contention that it is a deliberate design of the playwrights would be very speculative, and the character development might well be considered artistically inept. But Philaster's villainy in striking a lady and his nefarious trick of wounding Bellario to divert suspicion from himself are conclusive evidence of his fallibility. Professor Schutt maintained that Philaster's wounding of Bellario was the "worst blot in the play". He wrote: "We feel revolted at the deed, Philaster himself is quite indifferent to us. The truth is that the authors sacrificed his character to stage-effect. What they want to bring out here is Bellario's self-sacrifice raised to the highest melodramatic pitch."²⁸ It seems, rather, that Philaster's character is sacrificed to theme and plot development, if, indeed, "sacrificed" is the accurate word to use. The audience is forced by this overt, physical action to

²⁸Schutt, p. 85.

raise some new and serious questions: "Where is virtue? Is the right-ful king who is a moral degenerate entitled to the throne?" We are revolted at Philaster's trick mainly because it is Philaster who does it; we, along with the lords in the play, had hopes of seeing him on the throne. But now, even if we had been willing to excuse his suspiciousness and jealousy, we cannot in good conscience excuse him for so heinous a deed as this. Our erst-while hero, who was bravery personified, is now seen creeping into a bush, shifting for his life.

Our discovery of Philaster's frailty comes simultaneously with his own discovery of it, and as if speaking for us, he castigates himself even before he strikes Arethusa:

I am to blame to be so much in rage:

.
Oh, monstrous! Tempt me not, you gods! good gods,
Tempt not a frail man! (IV. iii. 19f)

Even though serious doubts are now raised about Philaster's nobility of character, his self-accusations can elicit pity from us; we no longer think of him as a semi-god, but as a man with all the foibles of any mortal. By this turn of events Beaumont and Fletcher demonstrate their serious concerns in Philaster. "The characterization of Philaster, a man honourable in the main, 'the bravery of his age,' is designed to comment upon human fallibility, a fallibility which princes are shown to share."²⁹

Philaster's discovery of his human frailty in Act IV ought to remind us of earlier scenes with the King. The King and Philaster seem to be foils to one another. The contrast which their characters provide is further evidence of Beaumont and Fletcher's interest in character

²⁹Peter Davison, "The Serious Concerns of Philaster," ELH, XXX (1963), 11-12.

development which is carefully integrated in the whole action of the play.

Earlier in the play, when he discovered that Pharamond had been unfaithful to Arethusa, his intended bride, the King acknowledged his guilt:

You gods, I see that who unrighteously
 Holds wealth or state from others shall be cursed
 In that which meaner men are blest withal;
 Ages to come shall know no male of him
 Left to inherit, and his name shall be
 Blotted from earth; if he have any child,
 It shall be crossly match'd; the gods themselves
 Shall sow wild strife betwixt her lord and her.
 Yet, if it be your wills, forgive the sin
 I have committed; let it not fall
 Upon this understanding child of mine!
 She has not broke your laws. But how can I
 Look to be heard of gods that must be just,
 Praying upon the ground I hold by wrong?

(II. iv. 56-60)

The King here was deeply conscious of the consequence of his sin. It is consistent with Old Testament theology that the punishment of the father's sin should fall upon his children, and it is consistent with the themes in the play that the chaos of state affairs should be reflected in dishonor in affairs of love. At this point the Jacobean audience might be tempted to have pity for the King, but that pity was obstructed because the audience knew full well, as did the King, that genuine repentance (according to the Christian faith) requires more than recognition of the sin. The repentant one must "go and sin no more". At least, however, the audience was alerted to the possibility of the King's repentance. And perhaps this awareness made the surprising (that is, in contrast to what happened in Elizabethan tragedies)

denouement, with its reconciliation, more expected and, therefore, aesthetically more palatable than modern critics have allowed.

Once the King's awareness of his unlawful usurpation is revealed, new dimensions to his character are seen as the play reveals what is the effect of the guilt feelings. The king's guilt makes him extremely sensitive to his rights and character as a king. He is caught in an impossible dilemma: He tries to overcome the pangs of his conscience by asserting more vehemently his power of kingly command, and all the while, the chaos of his state and the inescapable presence of the ground he holds by wrong undermine those attempts and prick his conscience all the more. The complexity of this dilemma as well as his resultant neurotic mental state are brilliantly portrayed in a dialogue between the King and Dion in Act IV, scene ii. Arethusa is lost in the forest and the King has commanded all to search for her:

King. -I wish to see my daughter; shew her me;
I do command you all, as you are subjects,
To shew her me! What! am I not you king?
If ay, then am I not to be obey'd?
Dion. Yes, if you command things possible and honest.
King. Things possible and honest! shew her me,
Or, let me perish, if I cover not
All Sicily with blood!

(IV. ii. 104-113)

The ostensible cause of his mental anguish is the loss of his daughter, but the real cause is his guilt over his usurpation. In his anguish he raises serious questions about the nature of kingship, serious questions which are recurrent themes in most of Beaumont and Fletcher's plays.

King. Alas, what are we kings!
Why do you gods place us above the rest,
To be served, flatter'd, and adored, till we
Believe we hold within our hands your thunder,

And when we come to try the power we have,
 There's not a leaf shakes at our threatenings?
 I have sinn'd, 'tis true, and here stand to be punish'd
 Yet I Would not thus be punish'd: let me choose
 My way, and lay it on!

(IV. ii. 125-133)

We witness in Act IV a process of change in the King, a change which has been carefully prepared for dramatically. He is becoming aware of his own humanity, and he becomes more respectful of common men. He learns not to bully his subjects and not to demand impossible things; kings are men too, and the efficacy of the commands of gods is not theirs. At the end of scene two, when the search for Arethusa is resumed, he asks, not commands, "each man" to search (only fifty-six lines earlier, the subjects had been "you fellows"), and he joins the search himself. The direction of the play's action in regard to the character of Philaster and the King becomes clear in Act Four. It is clearly the picture of the King's moral amelioration and Philaster's degeneration. Both of them however, come to see their fundamental human frailty, and that discovery is an integral part of the play's total message.

In Act V the King's greatness of character far outshines Philaster's. The King repents of his previous faults and he realizes his royal responsibility to preserve the state from chaos and moral depravity. To do this he willingly gives up the throne. He is greatly concerned with the safety of the foreign prince who is held prisoner by an angry mob:

What they will do with this poor prince, the
 gods know, and I fear. (V. iii. 172-173)

It is in consideration of Pharamond's safety that the King turns to Philaster, seeking forgiveness and asking Philaster to assume command:

Oh, worthy sir, forgive me! do not make
Your miseries and my faults meet together,
To bring a greater danger. Be yourself,
Still sound amongst diseases. I have wrong'd you;
And though I find it last, and beaten to it,
Let first your goodness know it. Calm the people,
And be what you were born to.

(V. iii. 177-183)

In scene iv the King repeats his statement of repentance, but unlike the mere verbal reference to his crimes in Act II, he moves on to act with strength of purpose and with honor. Significantly, he wishes to redeem the honor and name of Arethusa. He admonishes Pharamond and deals with him as a king ought--with mercy and political astuteness:

----- You, Pharamond,
Shall have free passage, and a conduct home
Worthy so great a prince. When you come there,
Remember 'twas your faults that lost you her,
And not my purposed will.

(V. v. 203-207)

The King's treatment of Pharamond stands in stark contrast to that given by the crowd as depicted in the previous scene. Here the King saves the citizens from their own worst selves; their crude boorish treatment of Pharamond was not considerate of Pharamond's rank and it would surely have created an international incident which would have endangered the safety of the realm. The King's conduct and the grand style of his language attest mightily to a change in character to that which is worthy of a king. Philaster himself recognized this change when he addressed the king respectfully and pledged his support to him:

-----Mighty sir,
 I will not do your greatness so much wrong,
 As not to make your word truth. (V. iv. 187-189)

In contrast, Philaster, although he does repel the crowd in Act V, seems to be obsessed with a death wish; he is unable and unwilling to face the hard consequences of life and kingly responsibility.³⁰

The Citizens and Politics

Mary Adkins has pointed out the importance of the citizens as a dominant force in Philaster. "They are the means by which the usurping king of Sicily is deposed, the interloper Pharamond shipped back to Spain, and Philaster restored to his rightful inheritance."³¹ In a sense the citizens, though mostly unseen, are characters in the play. And, as Miss Adkins suggested, it is surprising and significant that they are made "the agents of justice." Miss Adkins was right also in claiming that the King is unaware of the necessity to appease the public and that Dion and the lord's function is to interpret "the mood and temper of the people" for the audience. "Upon the king's threat to imprison Philaster, Dion murmurs, '...you dare not for the people.'"³² Throughout the play the lords are concerned with the reaction of the people and with use of the people's rage for political advantage. A discussion of Dion's role in the play will show how the function of the citizens and lords is related to the movement and message of the play.

³⁰See V. iii. 27f; V. iii. 76f; V. v. 76f.

³¹Mary G.M. Adkins, "The Citizens in Philaster: Their Function and Significance," SP, XLIII (1946), 203.

³²Adkins, p. 206.

The responsibility toward the people that the courtiers assume in the play is to save them from themselves. Since the people lack political acumen, they must be led by the nobility. Granting this assumption, the lords in Philaster must be considered to be true to their responsibility, for they recognize this high moral duty that is theirs. Since they assume positions of leadership, the moral vitality of the state is dependant upon their sense of honor, their virtue, and their political wisdom. In such a system the highest noble of them all, the king, is particularly responsible for the state of the realm. In the case of the political situation in Philaster, the King cannot fulfill his calling because he holds the throne unlawfully. Thus the lords, particularly Dion, assume the responsibility. All along in the play Dion realizes and accepts this duty to lead the people. But he attempts to manipulate state affairs without realizing the moral obligation to God and people which such a role involves. He does not feel the personal commitment which only the head of state can officially and actually feel. At the beginning of the play he gives evidence of an aristocratic contempt for the people:

Faith, sir, the multitude, that seldom know
any thing but their own opinions, speak that they
would have. (I. i. 11-13)

Though he is indeed constantly aware of the importance of the people as, for example, when he warns the king who threatens to imprison Philaster, "---you dare not for the people." (I.i. 292), he seems to view them mainly as instruments of political maneuverings, as, for example, when he exhorts Philaster:

-----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, the abused people,
 Who, like to raging torrents, shall swell high,
 And so begirt the dens of these Male-dragons,
 That, through the strongest safety, they shall beg
 For mercy at your sword's point.

(I. i. 320-327)

Such an attitude toward the people is not altogether contemptible
 when one remembers Dion's aristocratic nature and honourable intentions:

-----Is it not a shame
 For us that would write noble in the land,
 For us that should be freemen, to behold
 A man that is the bravery of his age,
 Philaster, press'd down from his royal right
 By this regardless King? (III. i. 4-9)

Yet the sanctity of the doctrine of noblesse oblige cannot veil
 Dion's faults. His main faults become especially detectable when, in
 order to confute Philaster's love of Arethusa which deters his over-
 throwing the King, Dion throws the influence of his known virtuous
 character in support of an inconclusive report that Arethusa has been
 unfaithful. For the apparent good of the state Dion would even swear
 falsely to obtain his desired ends. Throughout the play he is first and
 always a political pragmatist, and he attempts to arrange affairs so that
 they will work out well. But such consideration of political expediency
 leads Dion to a cold and inhuman attitude toward the people. For
 example, when Cleremont expresses a fear that Philaster's act of strik-
 ing the princess will lose him the hearts of the people, Dion responds:
 "Fear it not; their over-wise heads will think/ it but a trick." (IV.
 iv. 149) The tone of this remark is not the tone of one who loves the
 people and seeks their good. Dion's fault is that he assumes the bur-
 den of action without knowing the personal burdens of responsibility for
 his actions. He acts ostensibly as if he is only responsible to the

people, but we soon discover that he feels responsible only to himself. Dion doesn't really seem to be concerned with honour and virtue--not even with regard to Philaster; at the end of Act IV when it is clearly evident to those at court that Philaster is not the "bravery of his age", Dion is willing to overlook Philaster's conduct altogether. We must question what Dion's motives really were from the beginning. We had thought that his indignation was aroused because the throne had been usurped from the great and rightful heir.

Another characteristic important to note in Dion is his fault-finding. He finds fault with the King, Pharamond, Philaster, the ladies, the crowds--everyone, save himself. The basis of all his faults is his inability to see the human fallibility he has in kinship with all those around him. Beaumont and Fletcher were careful to direct Dion's character development so that Act V would reveal how he is taught to be mindful of his humanness. In Act V when Dion discovers that Bellario is a woman, in fact his own daughter, he must admit that he had acted indiscreetly when he lied to Philaster:

I dare accuse none; but, before you two,
The virtue of our age, I bend my knee
For mercy. (V. v. 137-138)

Heretofore, Dion showed no traces of mortality. The King and Philaster have been brought to their knees, and it is only fitting that Dion too, whose fault is similar to theirs, should become aware of his human frailty. Earlier in the play, he had recognized his error in accusing Arethusa, but then he was not significantly crushed to humility and recognition of his humanity:

A plague upon myself, a thousand plagues,
 For having such unworthy thoughts of her dear honour.
 Oh, I could beat myself! or do you beat me,
 And I'll beat you; for we had all one thought.
 (V. iii. 125-128)

Then he had no time for tears; he immediately included the other lords in his sin; he felt no extreme personal guilt. But in scene five he comes to his knees, fully cognizant of his personal guilt. Professor John Danby would seem to be in error when he claims that "Neither Dion nor the King seem to have anything in common, not even common humanity...."³³ For, in their repentance, common humanity is exactly what they do have.

The central movement of the entire play is to be seen in the development of the characters. The major characters--Philaster, King, and Dion--come to sense their common human frailty. In contrast, the ladies in the play (especially Megra) and Pharamond already know their imperfections and human desires from the beginning. The play does not end until the King, Philaster, and, finally, Dion become aware of their imperfections too. And in this action is the serious concern of the play. The characters come to see themselves and events of their confused state as evidence of an essential human imperfection which allows no man to be very like a god--not even a king. The revolutionary implications of this revelation remain to be discussed here.

Professor Peter Davison, who in a recent article is daring enough to suggest that there are serious concerns in Philaster, suggests that concern for contemporary affairs played a part in the development of

³³Danby, p. 164.

the tragicomic form of Beaumont and Fletcher. About Philaster he contends: "One can reasonably claim that many passages...echo current controversies and one might go further and suggest that King James's very statements were represented on the stage."³⁴ He goes on to trace certain parallel arguments from Philaster and the political writings and speeches of King James, whose Works was composed in entirety by 1610, about the same time as the writing of Philaster. Davison offers a series of quotations and references from the play and the works of James which are similar in content and argument--references which deal with the nature of kingship, the precise nature of the contract between God and King, and the right of subjects to question the king and demand reasons of him. Davison shows that quotations from the play seem to echo sentiments of James on the following points:

- (1) Kings are gods upon earth.
- (2) The King is held to account by God alone, even if he breaks his "contract" with the people.
- (3) According to James, a wicked King was sent by God for a curse to his people.³⁵

The arguments of James, who favored absolute monarchy, find embodiment in the King in Philaster. But in the play and in Jacobean England there was opposition to absolute monarchy (of the Jamesian fashion); according to Davison (and according to the play), there was particular controversy about what a subject might say and demand. We need only recall Dion's restriction on the King to demand things possible and

³⁴Davison, p. 8.

³⁵Davison, passim.

honest. The whole question of absolute monarchy is obviously treated in the play. The movement of the play shows an absolute monarch in intention who becomes, in the end, amenable to popular will.

Philaster and other Beaumont and Fletcher plays strike at the heart of the Jacobean uncertainty; they explore the confusion of a people for whom absolute committal in matters of politics and morals are traditional mandates, but for whom absolute committal is really no longer possible. Professor Danby has written: "It is a law of the Beaumont world that absolute committal removes the need for moral deliberation, and supervenes on conflict by suppression of one of the warring terms."³⁶ He is right, it would seem, but the world of Beaumont and Fletcher to which Philaster introduces us is much more complex, for that world only appears to accept absolute committal at the play's end, and it only appears to suppress one of the warring terms of moral deliberation. What really happens is this: At the beginning of Philaster (and in other plays, as will be demonstrated later) we see absolute committal to old values and conventions. The true king we suppose will gain his natural and rightful status. But such a progression in events in dramatic praise of old values is absurd, because fervent commitment to those values does not really exist. The lords and citizens give evidence of this absurdity as they try to raise an obviously unfit man to a throne already held by a man whose conduct of late would entitle him to kingly respect. The play implies an even greater absurdity--moral deliberation over the answer to a question which sensitive theater-goers

³⁶Danby, p. 167.

of the Jacobean world and aesthetic readers of the play today surely could not avoid: At the end of the play, who is the King; who will assume command? If it is Philaster (who apparently does take the throne), then a worthy man has been rejected for an unworthy one. And if it is the King (who incidentally makes the last speech), then the old values which fostered the contortions in the play have not been satisfied. It is absurd to sacrifice the equanimity of the human spirit to an anachronistic and cruel moral contest. At the end, the play comes full circle and gives token allegiance and affirmation to the old order: Philaster, the rightful heir, becomes king in spite of his short-comings. One of the warring terms of the dilemma [who is really king?] is suppressed. One cannot, however, find absolute commitment to old values and unquestioning allegiance to the sovereign here. The play leaves us with a commitment which is recoiling from the absurdity of anachronistic moral deliberation; it is a commitment which, aware of the frailties of all men, cannot be considered absolute.

CHAPTER III - A KING AND NO KING

In his article "The Morality of A King and No King" Professor Robert Turner holds that Beaumont and Fletcher's tragicomedies are "morally shabby", that is, they lack "any high seriousness of intention."³⁷ He arrives at this conclusion on the basis of his understanding that the plays are constructed to the end of "exploiting all the emotional possibilities". Turner, an exponent of the psychological interpretations, denounces the plays (particularly A King and No King) as "immoral", charging that "indulgence becomes not only respectable but very nearly sanctified."³⁸ It is the contention of this writer, however, that indulgence is not sanctified, in fact, that the whole play presents a moral dilemma and a moral reservation. The play does not affirm the immoral, neither does it sanctify indulgence in it.

The struggle of Arbaces, king of Iberia, is the struggle of a man who accepts the moral order, and yet finds rebellion against it in his own flesh. In his particular case, the moral dilemma is eliminated--at least it appears so--by the removal of the cause of complication. The play allows subtly, if not demands, that the audience recognize that the contest between Will and Reason is not settled by avoiding it. Beaumont and Fletcher did not avoid the conflict by ending the play as they did. The surprising denouement is certainly surprising, but it

³⁷Renaissance Papers (1958, 1959, 1960), p. 94

³⁸Turner, p. 103.

is not a trick by which the audience can have both the sin and morality. Beaumont and Fletcher did mirror their society which was avoiding a conflict of moral values--avoiding it because it was no longer sure that its traditional values (about incest, friendship, and kingship) were meaningful or absolute. The society of the play solves its dilemma by resolving to live as if the old order does hold. Yet everyone--playwrights and audience--knows that the solution is not honest. In Beaumont and Fletcher's plays the real feelings and doubts lurk just below the surface of the narrative and action, thus creating a sharp tension which makes their presence inescapable. Such is the situation in A King and No King.

The world of A King and No King is unnatural and immoderate. Arbaces, the king, is possessed by hasty tempers and he vacillates suddenly between emotional extremities; the wise balance of modesty and boldness is not in his nature. In the first scene of the play we discover that Arbaces' mother has an unnatural hate for her son that has led her to make several assassination attempts. Early in the play we also discover Arbaces developing unnatural and incestuous desires for his sister. Before the play is over, however, we learn that these latter two unnatural relationships are explained or resolved in such a way that they no longer appear disgraceful. The plan of this chapter is to demonstrate that the turn of events at the end of the play is prepared for throughout, though not in specific terms, and that both those intimations and the denouement create a dramatic tension and a complexity of meaning which raise serious doubts about the acceptability of Elizabethan moral values in the era of Beaumont and Fletcher. The approach in this chapter will be the same as in the previous one, namely, to

discuss the play with a view to its character and thematic development. There is no attempt in this study to give detailed attention to all parts of every play. In the case of A King and No King as with other plays, those important passages in the play and those pertinent to this discussion have been selected.

The second chapter of this study indicated that Philaster (1609) was the first attempt by Beaumont and Fletcher together to probe into the complexities of the general Jacobean incertitude. Because it was a first effort, the dramatist's treatment of their themes was perhaps not direct and comprehensive enough to yield completely clear understandings of their insights into human nature and the problems of their day. A consideration of later plays of the Beaumont and Fletcher corpus reveals that their attitudes became more clearly defined and their artistic techniques grew more refined. The first play of two young playwrights (Beaumont was approximately twenty-three and Fletcher thirty) was necessarily experimental. It is true that all six of the plays of the Beaumont and Fletcher canon are strikingly similar in construction and characterization--so similar in fact that a single analysis would perhaps serve for all.³⁹ As is the case, however, with many artists, continued effort enhanced their dramatic skill and it allowed the youthful brilliance and insights into the complexity of the age to develop into a maturer genius. The evidences of a maturation of this kind are the clearness of themes and consummate artistic achievement of A King and No King (ca. 1610).

³⁹ See p. xix of Professor Thorndike's edition cited previously.

Mardonius, who represents what is honorable and reasonable, counsels Arbaces the king throughout the play. His concern for the king's nobility and good behavior goes beyond his ties of friendship and loyalty as a subject. He has a genuine concern for the stability of the realm. In a very practical way he sees the moral uprightness of the king as the basis for the moral and legal structure of the society. Thus Mardonius counsels Arbaces at one point:

----- if you
do this crime, you ought to have no laws, for, after this,
it will be great injustice in you to punish any offender
for any crime. (III. iii. 100-103)⁴⁰

As was the case with Philaster, Arbaces too is not faultless, but his faults are evident early in the play. Arbaces has "hasty tempers" that cause him to move emotionally to "sudden extremities". Quite often Arbaces' extreme vanity is what triggers his violent rages. The remarkable intensity and the undue celerity of the fluctuations in his temper are revealed in the first scene of the play:

Arb. ----- What, will none
Vouchsafe to give me answer? am I grown
To such a poor respect? or do you mean
To break my wing? Speak, speak, some one of you
Or else by Heaven -----
1st Gent. So please your -----
Arb. ----- Monstrous!
I cannot be heard out; they cut me off,
As if I were too saucy. I will live
In woods, and talk to trees; they will allow me
To end what I begin. The meanest subject
Can find a freedom to discharge his soul,
And not I. Now it is a time to speak;
I hearken.
1st Gent. May it please -----

⁴⁰Citations from A King and No King in my text are to The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, A.H. Bullen, Variorum Edition (London, 1904), Vol. I.

Arb. I mean not you;
 Did not I stop you once; but I am grown
 To talk but idly: let another speak.
 2nd Gent. I hope your majesty -----
 Arb. Thou drawl'st thy words,
 That I must wait an hour, where other men
 Can hear in instants: throw your words away
 Quick and to purpose; I have told you this ---
 Bes. An't please your majesty -----
 Arb. Wilt thou devour me? This is such a rudeness
 As yet you never shew'd me: and I want
 Power to command, too; else, Mardonius
 Would speak at my request. Were you my king,
 I would have answer'd at your word, Mardonius:
 I pray you, speak, and truly; did I boast?
 Mar. Truth will offend you.
 Arb. You take all great care
 What will offend me, when you dare to utter
 Such things as these.

(I. i. 256-283)

The subject under discussion is almost entirely lost; the king's wild neurotic state dominates the stage. Already in the first scene the audience is introduced to a king whose many virtues are darkened by an overriding fault.

Professor Henry W. Wells has contended that A King and No King presents a fantastic story. In evidence of this point he suggests that Arbaces, the victor in a duel with Tigranes, is fantastically generous in offering his sister to be the bride of the vanquished.⁴¹ A closer look at the play will show that Arbaces is not being generous at all. In his gargantuan conceit, he offers Tigranes his sister because Tigranes fought nobly against him. The offer is accompanied by the following evidences of vanity:

⁴¹Elizabethan and Jacobean Playwrights, 2nd ed. (Port Washington, N.Y., 1964), p. 121.

Arb. Thy sadness, brave Tigranes, takes away
 From my full victory: am I become
 Of so small fame, that any should grieve
 When I overcome him?

.....
 ----- and never think,
 The man I held worthy to combat me
 Shall be used servilely. Thy ransom is ...
 To take my only sister to thy wife.
 (I. i. 94f)

This act is one of the early evidences of Arbaces' fault. The thrust of this play is similar to Philaster: a worthy king must come to recognize his own humanness.

The relationship between the king and the common people reveals subtly a sharp change in Jacobean attitude about the nature of the king. Act Two presents the common country people and their characteristic sauciness and vulgarity. As might be expected, they loose the vulgarity of their humor against the snobbish common citizens of the city; they show no respect for differences in rank. We soon discover that this lack of awe for the town-citizens was as a prelude to the manner in which Arbaces would be received when he returned from the wars. To be sure, there is a flourish on the stage when the king's arrival is announced, and he is greeted with cheers from subjects, but the tone of the scene makes one feel that the whole ceremony (for both country and town folk) approaches being a farce. The whole ceremonial welcome appears to be an empty formality, the common man's bow to the established order. Just before the king's arrival the shopkeepers and city-women are engaged in bawdy humor and a bit of good-natured roguery. Then a man runs in announcing the king's arrival; with just a slight flourish the people interrupt their fun to proclaim:

"God preserve your majesty!" The people listen to the king give them the report of his labors on their behalf. (His reports sound amazingly like a form letter memo to employees at a factory.) All the people in unison speak the intermittent responses to the king's speeches; it would seem that they have experienced these little get-togethers before. One would almost think that the citizens were furnished a printed program, for they all say only what it is obvious the king wants them to say. When Arbaces leaves he is promptly forgotten. The casual dismissal of the audience with the king without the remotest trace of awe makes a mockery (not malicious) of the protocol. The comments of the shopkeepers and women immediately following the king's departure indicate that his coming was for them a not particularly interesting interruption of their daily routine:

1st Shop-M. Come, shall we go? all's done.
 Wom. Ay, for God's sake; I have not made a fire yet.
 2nd Shop-M. Away, away! all's done.
 (II. ii. 146-149)

The only comment the people make about the king's remarks would show that either they did not listen attentively to what he said or that they are making fun of him:

1st Cit. W. -----Did not his majesty say he had brought us home peas for all our money?
 2nd Cit. W. Yes, marry, did he.
 1st Cit. W. They're the first I heard on this year, by my troth: I long'd for some of 'em. Did he not say we should have some?
 2nd Cit. W. Yes, and so we shall anon, I warrant you, have every one a peck brought home to our houses.
 (II. ii. 159-166)

There is a marked difference between the attitude of the knaves and citizens here and the attitude of the Woodsmen, Country-Fellow, and

citizens in Philaster. In Philaster, the people who live in the forest area are just as crude and vulgar as they are in A King and No King. At least, however, the Woodsmen are pre-occupied with a discussion of the matters at court; they have opinions about the happenings there. The citizens stand in awe of their prince; at his word the angry mob is calmed. The Country-Fellow's first words are "I'll see the King, if he be in the forest." (IV. v. 78). He has a rural curiosity for the gay sights of the court and for the person of the king; he has searched two hours for him. Even after he is diverted from his purpose by his duel with Philaster, he returns to it saying, "I pray you, friend, let me see the king." (IV. iv. 145). The attitude of the citizens of Philaster was the creation of young playwrights making their first effort to probe the incertitude of their age; Beaumont and Fletcher were not yet in full command of the attitude they wanted to present nor did they realize into what direction their probing would lead them. Thus the citizens in that play lean toward the conventional attitudes. But in A King and No King the playwrights, sensing the effect of the popular contemporary disenchantment over King James, depict the lack of reverence for the king in their citizens. The solution the citizens come upon is to bow the knee to the old order but with no personal commitment. They regard Arbaces as king, but they do not embrace him as sovereign and lord.

In A King and No King Beaumont and Fletcher make more use of parallels and contrasts of characters than in Philaster. Dramatic character interaction and structural unity seem more fully realized as the character parallels provide illuminating commentary on one

another. One obvious parallel is Arbaces and Tigranes. They both fall in love with Panthea, and this love causes for both of them a moral dilemma. Professor Mizener has written that there is no serious significance in the parallel.⁴² A more accurate view, it would seem, is that of Professor Turner who does recognize serious significance in it: "...Through Reason he [Tigranes] masters his desire for Panthea and returns honorably to Spaconia. ...In a sense, by defeating Tigranes the king has subjugated the better half of himself and has on the symbolic level enslaved himself just as on the narrative level he has enslaved Tigranes."⁴³

The similarities of A King and No King to morality plays are readily apparent when one considers the characters Mardonius and Bessus. Turner's observations in this regard are extremely helpful. He sees Mardonius as a parallel of the Good Angel and, symbolically, a projection of Arbaces' Reason. "Mardonius...is cast in the role of Arbaces' mentor; it is he who can discern and preserve the virtue that is intermixed with Arbaces' folly."⁴⁴ The play depicts a contest between Reason and Will, the same two contestants present in many morality plays. In the end, Arbaces rejects Mardonius, his Reason, thus losing "the only difference between man and beast."⁴⁵

Bessus serves as both the Evil Angel, counseling Arbaces to let his Will override his Reason, and as a foil to Arbaces, parodying his

⁴²Mizener, "The High Design", p. 145.

⁴³Turner, p. 98.

⁴⁴Turner, p. 95.

⁴⁵Turner, p. 100.

boastfulness. "Unlike Mardonius, he does not seek literally to control the king, but he does suggest foolishly (and amusingly) that at least from his own point of view he can be set on the same level with him."⁴⁶

The minds of Arbaces and Panthea are the battleground of the contest between Will and Reason. One of the thematic concerns of the play is the process by which wickedness encroaches and finally perverts reason. Arbaces himself explains the workings of evil: "There is a method in man's wickedness;/ It grows up by degrees." (V. iv. 38-39) Throughout the play we witness this perversion of reason taking place as Arbaces articles with himself, moving all the while from hesitancy to break the moral code to utter recalcitrance. This process is brilliantly portrayed at the end of Act IV when Arbaces unconsciously resorts to using his powers of reason and logic to castigate his Reason for obstructing his incestuous desires:

Accursed man!
 Thou bought'st thy reason at too dear a rate;
 For thou hast all thy actions bounded in
 With curious rules, when every beast is free:
 What is there that acknowledges a kindred
 But wretched man? Who ever saw the bull
 Fearfully leave the heifer that he likes,
 Because they had one dam.

(IV. iv. 131-138)

At the end of the scene Arbaces and Panthea conclude that they may safely walk together and kiss--a striking contrast to early scenes when the thought of being together was repulsive to both. Familiarity with wicked thoughts breeds contempt for the rule which forbids the familiarity.

⁴⁶Turner, p. 96.

One of the most dramatically effective scenes of the Beaumont and Fletcher production is the first scene of Act III. This is the scene in which Arbaces first entertains incestuous thoughts. All of the major characters are on the stage, and all of them react to the happenings there in such a way as to provide a psychological study of their individual characters and to reveal their relationships to one another. The major complication in the plot is introduced here, as well as direct and indirect indications of its ramifications for characters other than the two directly involved. The narrative is made up of a concatenation of questions and responses between Arbaces and various other characters. Arbaces' speech insisting that his sister is dead can well serve as a focal point for the entire scene:

As hell! by Heaven, as false as hell!
 My sister!--is she dead? if it be so,
 Speak boldly to me, for I am a man,
 And dare not quarrel with divinity;
 And **do** not think to cozen me with this.
 I see you all are mute, and stand amazed,
 Fearful to answer me: it is too true,
 A decreed instant cuts off every life,
 For which to mourn is to repine: she died
 A virgin though, more innocent than sleep,
 As clear as her own eyes; and blessedness
 Eternal waits upon her where she is:
 I know she could not make a wish to change
 Her state for new; and you shall see me bear
 My crosses like a man. We all must die;
 And she hath taught us how.

(III. i. 120-135)

Consideration of Professor Mizener's adverse reaction to this speech will provide the springboard for discussion here. Mizener holds that this speech is extravagant; it is not "carefully built up in terms of plot and character"; it does not have in this sense "any roots in the soil of narrative form". "What the speech shows," according to

Mizener, "is that Beaumont and Fletcher had a highly developed sense of just how far they could push a given feeling without pitching the whole speech over into the abyss of absurdity."⁴⁷ Mizener discusses this speech without seriously considering who said it and in what situation it was said. Let us see how a different starting point will lead us to a different interpretation. Arbaces is an "extravagant" man--to use Mizener's word--in an extravagant situation. He is extravagant in nature, much like Tamburlaine, only he has a sense of his subjugation to Heaven. This speech is made by a brother who is beginning to feel the urge of incest. This man of sudden extremities, whose conscience pricks him mightily, constantly rants with himself--even in this speech. This speech demonstrates the depth of the tensions within such a person as he confronts a damning sin. But Mizener would say that "the response demanded by this speech is not justified in terms of Arbaces' character and the situation."⁴⁸ He contends:

...On careful examination it is quite clear that character and situation are not the center of Beaumont and Fletcher's interest here, that everything in the speech is primarily directed to arousing in the audience a feeling which is both in degree and kind not so justified. The speech lacks the tone of irony and bitterness which it must have if it is to be taken as the words of a man in the midst of self-discovery. Its tone is one of elegiac simplicity and dignity, of graceful pathos. It was plainly written with a view to extracting all the pity possible from the thought of a sister dead....⁴⁹

There is another interpretation which would lead to a different opinion. Because the discovery of his love for Panthea is the "culminating

⁴⁷Mizener, p. 142.

⁴⁸Mizener, p. 143.

⁴⁹Mizener, p. 143.

disaster" of the play for Arbaces, he can make this speech with a deep and prevailing sense of disaster. So the feeling of disaster is at least genuine. And because his statements are expressed in elegiac form, perhaps one could be excused for thinking for a moment that the supposed death of Panthea is the apparent culminating disaster. But such an interpretation is not tenable when one observes other elements in the scene. First of all the play (and this scene) obviously has a psychological concern; it is particularly concerned with the psyche of Arbaces. The several references by Mardonius to Arbaces' mental state are evidence of this psychological concern. A comment such as Mardonius' aside "What, is he mad?" compels the audience to consider Arbaces' mental state. Moreover, the tension created by Arbaces' ravings with Gobrias and his extreme emotional disturbance just prior to the speech in question would make any feeling of sincerity in Arbaces or any genuine emotional response to the supposed death highly unlikely.

It is important to note that throughout this scene statements have been made by Arbaces which must have been taken in different ways by other characters on the stage. Even prior to Arbaces' speech Tigranes is impatient to meet Panthea; as far as he is concerned Arbaces' remarks are an unnecessary delay to his meeting her. Mardonius can make no sense whatsoever out of Arbaces' denial of his kinship with Panthea. When Arbaces is told that Panthea is his sister, he says: "'Tis false." Gobrias responds: "Is it?" This cautious response betrays the awkwardness he and Arane, who knew that Panthea was indeed not Arbaces' sister, must have felt and shown. So there is in this

scene a precedent for statements to be taken in different ways by various characters. (Perhaps only in performance could the fears of Gobrias and Arane become clear.) Similarly, because only Arbaces and the audience know of his incestuous desires, any remark of Arbaces has double meaning--one for the other characters on stage and another for Arbaces and audience. Only the other characters in the play could possibly take the "elegy" as Mizener suggests that the audience would, that is, as a sincere elegy. Since the audience shares in Arbaces' secret, it could not be so gullible.

Furthermore, if the actor who played Arbaces had been at all sensitive to Arbaces' extreme mental agony at this point, he, no doubt, would have played the speech accordingly. Unless the actor played the lines with "elegiac simplicity and dignity" (which, in view of Arbaces' emotional state, seems unlikely) it is highly improbable that even the other characters could be expected to get the impression that Mr. Mizener does. The near state of madness that Arbaces is in makes it inconceivable that the lines would be played with "slow and solemn regularity".

Typically Fletcherian, the denouement of A King and No King presents a surprising turn of events. After Arbaces has decided to commit the sin of incest he discovers that Panthea is not his sister, that he is not really of royal birth, and that marriage to Panthea, the rightful heir, will enable him to remain king. Twentieth-century critics have pointed to this denouement as evidence of Beaumont and Fletcher's decadence. Professor Tomlinson says that the play "runs

away from issues raised or hinted at earlier."⁵⁰ Turner contends: "Punishment for surrender to the passions vanishes, a complete subversion of the moral and intellectual code which had formed the basis for tragedy."⁵¹ Professor Schelling maintains that "dramatic ethics are not satisfied with the denouement."⁵² These men do not seem to notice the piercing irony of the denouement. In the last line of the play Arbaces recognizes and rejoices that in terms of lineage he is "proved no king". The deeper implications of that statement are blatant. Arbaces is proved no king not only in lineage but in nature. Reason lost the contest with Will; in the course of the play Arbaces determined to commit the sin. The fortunate turn of events does not eliminate that fact, it does not make him more worthy; and surely the audience could not have forgotten that he intended to transgress its moral laws. But Arbaces is obeyed anyway, and he will be crowned anyway. Only in token does the denouement affirm the moral code on incest and kingship. The Jacobean doubts about absolute values are held in abeyance here as they were in Philaster--by giving token acceptance of the moral code. Arbaces is acceptable as king because, on a technicality, he committed no actual crime, and the code about incest is technically held intact because Panthea proves not to be Arbaces' sister. But the irony and absurdity of such token affirmation is devastatingly obvious.

⁵⁰Tomlinson, A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama, p. 251.

⁵¹Turner, p. 103.

⁵²Felix E. Schelling, Elizabethan Drama 1558-1642 (New York, 1959), I. 196.

CHAPTER IV - THE MAID'S TRAGEDY

In a sense, The Maid's Tragedy (ca. 1610) does not belong in the same category or comparison with the two tragicomedies discussed in this study. The thematic concerns and dramatic techniques in this play, however, are quite similar to those in the other plays; in fact, in the opinion of this writer, The Maid's Tragedy presents the concerns that were typically Beaumont and Fletcher's more skillfully and effectively than the other plays. But even this play--especially this play--does not save Beaumont and Fletcher from the scorn of modern critics. Again the main interpretations of this play have their basis in the view that theatrical effectiveness was our playwrights' primary concern and principle of organization. The position of Professor Waith is a capsule summary of much recent interpretation. He writes about the play: "It is a sequence of brilliantly executed scenes in which each component element is pushed to an extreme."⁵³

One major intention of the previous two chapters of this study was to indicate that characterization and plot development were not sacrificed to situation and dramatic effect. And that certainly is the intention of this chapter. It seems, moreover, that what Beaumont and Fletcher were trying to get at in their themes is more clearly discernible in this play. Our playwrights' method of plot and character development, though certainly evident in the other plays, here lacks the haziness which was somewhat evident in the other experimental efforts,

⁵³Waith, The Pattern of Tragicomedy, p. 25.

and it is fully realized in this play. The Maid's Tragedy illuminates all the other plays. Thus it is appropriate that it should be last in our discussion.

It has been suggested by critics (e.g. Ellis-Fermor) that an atmosphere of spiritual defeat and general uncertainty accompanied James' ascendancy to the throne. At that time also subsequent questions arose about what a King might do and what subjects might say. In the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher one great moral dilemma stood at the center of the general incertitude: allegiance to the traditional sanctity and sovereignty of the throne vs. repulsion at some wickedness in the king which would tend to undermine the traditional value. Consequently, Beaumont and Fletcher's characters were often caught in the web of that dilemma. The idea of such a clash was not the invention of our playwrights, neither was the idea of the dramatic clash being internalized in a person. But in The Maid's Tragedy particularly, the use of polaric tensions became the basic unifying principle for the several areas of development--character, plot, narrative. It is the intention of this chapter to indicate the structural importance and the thematic significance of the polarity through consideration of characterization and specific scenes.

Practically all the characters in the play are caught in a moral dilemma. They stand in the middle of a confrontation of two values; the confrontation is such that one of the values must be forsaken, thus sin is inevitable. Amintor is torn between the desire to defend his own dignity and loyalty to the throne. Evadne is forced by Melantius to place her family's honor and good name above her sovereign's life. At

one point in the play Melantius himself discovers that his friendship to Amintor and his duty to defend his sister's good name are mutually exclusive. All of these characters must choose between two warring terms, both of which involve a sin.

If viewed collectively, the characters in the play can be divided into two camps: first, that part of the society which challenges the rights and authority of the king and, second, Amintor, who, by his respect of the king's commands, affirms the traditional moral values. The lack of awe at the king's commands is revealed subtly at his first appearance on the stage. His very first order is summarily disobeyed; Calianax, father of Aspatia, refuses to join hands with Melantius. The king responds: "This is no time/ To force you to't."⁵⁴ Then he smoothes over the issue with a tactful compromise. But Melantius' subsequent disregard of the king's authority and the eventual assassination make one doubtful that the king could ever have forced the two men to bend to his will. It is interesting that the king's last command, insisting by his power of the crown that Evadne not kill him, is also ignored. In contrast to the other characters' irreverence, Amintor's devotion to his king and to the code is unwavering, even when he discovers that his wife is the King's mistress.

In that sacred word,
 "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. 314-318)

⁵⁴Citations from The Maid's Tragedy in my text are to The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, A.H. Bullen, ed. Variorum Edition (London, 1904), Vol. I.

There is in Amintor's position an inherent absurdity which the play does not identify overtly; nevertheless, once discerned its obviousness suggests that it was meant to be seen. Amintor is affirming a tenet in a system of beliefs to allow a situation which is itself contrary to that system. The king's arrangement of the Amintor-Evadne marriage and his failure to command respect are evidence that he is not only no true king in nature, but he is also immoral. The absurdity lay in the ridiculous circumstance of having to decide to abstain from one immoral act (murder) to allow another (adultery). The revolutionary implications of the preceding statement will become increasingly apparent during the course of this chapter.

In the play, Amintor stands alone as champion of the sanctity of the throne. Unlike the heroes of Elizabethan tragedy, Amintor never acts ignobly, neither is he morally crushed by the wantonness of fate. In this regard Professor Waith maintains that Amintor does not conform to any of the familiar Elizabethan types of tragic hero.

In this instance he places his duty to the king higher than his personal honor and accepts the infamy of being the nominal husband of the King's mistress. But since his actions are presented as consistently noble, a tragic punishment is not the logical necessity that it is for the usual Elizabethan hero.

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A victim of circumstances, he suffers for his nobility, physically crushed but morally triumphant.⁵⁵

But in view of the king's guile, the play would seem to raise a serious question about the rightness of placing duty to the king higher than

⁵⁵Waith, p. 21.

personal honor. To put the matter simply: Is allegiance to a perverse king nobility?

But the matter for Amintor was obviously not so simple as that. At his first confrontation with the King after he has discovered the cuckoldry, Amintor insists that it is only the divinity about the King that strikes his passions dead and stays his hand from murder (III. i. 255f). Yet there are evidences in the play that there is another reason Amintor does not leap to revenge. In the same speech in which he cowers before the divinity about the king, he reasons:

Yet, should I murder you,
I might before the world take the excuse
Of madness; for, compare my injuries
And they will well appear too sad a weight
For reason to endure. (III. i. 261-265)

There is here an indirect suggestion that Amintor is concerned about what people will say about him. Later on we discover that Amintor is greatly concerned that he not be mocked. To Evadne who kneels before him to ask forgiveness he says:

Do not mock me:
Though I am tame, and bred up with my wrongs
Which are my foster-brothers, I may leap,
Like a hand-wolf, into my natural wildness
And do an outrage: prithee, do not mock me.
(IV. i. 196-200)

A second look at Amintor reveals that he always resented any affront to his dignity. In his first encounter with the king he expresses in an aside his resentment of an attempt by the King to speak of the sin (III. i. 168-171). Amintor's resentment of mockery is natural enough, but it also suggests that his motives go deeper than the ones he acknowledges. This type of secondary motive exists and becomes important

in several of the major characters, as will be demonstrated later. This kind of widening of the character dimensions also demonstrates Beaumont and Fletcher's skill and concern for characterization as well as situation.

Evadne--sister to Melantius, mistress to the King, and nominal wife to Amintor--rejects loyalty to the King, virtue of woman, and honor of family as guidelines for moral behavior. In Act III, she tells the King:

I swore indeed that I would never love
A man of lower place; but, if your fortune
Should throw you from this height, I bade you trust
I would forsake you, and would bend to him
That won your throne: I love with my ambition,
Not with my eyes. (III. i. 188-193)

This woman sets up her own ambition as standard for action. In so doing she dismisses the Heroic Virtues with no remorse or pangs of conscience. Even Melantius, who is willing to challenge the old morality in order to kill the king, does not reject all feeling of responsibility to his society and family; thus he converts her. But when he converts her to more conventional morality, she too has to choose between two sins; she must either permit dishonor to fall upon her family or she must submit to murder the king.

All the plays discussed in this study have been concerned with characters caught between moral opposites. Like most Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, Beaumont and Fletcher's plays were about kings and the rise and fall of kingdoms. Quite logically, the traditional beliefs about kingship most often served as the focal point for the moral dilemmas as they were revealed in the brilliant plot and character developments.

The contention of the previous two chapters was that the basic dramatic complications and moral dilemmas in Philaster and A King and No King resolved themselves in token affirmation of the established moral order and in the avowal of the people, who seemed not to have any real alternative, to live as if the old moral order still held. The resolution of the problem and the final message of The Maid's Tragedy are somewhat different.

The King made an astute observation about human character when he suspected that Evadne had been unfaithful to him:

I see there is no lasting faith in sin;
They that break word with Heaven will break again
With all the world, and so dost thou with me.
(III. i. 179-181)

The King is right. In fact, all the characters in the play, save Amintor, "break word with Heaven". Melantius is undutiful to his king; the King is an adulterer; Evadne is a whore. If Amintor, who keeps his duty to the throne and divinity, would "break word" like all the others, then evil and anarchy would have no check in Rhodes. Amintor is pictured sympathetically throughout the play; he commits no heinous deeds as does Philaster; even when he determines to seek revenge, he does so only under the most extreme circumstantial duress, not like Arbaces who puts up a weak battle against sin.

Amintor recognizes openly the fundamental absurdity of his situation--an absurdity which the other plays presented also:

What a wild beast is uncollected man!
The thing we call honour bears us all
Headlong unto sin, and yet itself is nothing.
(IV. ii. 317-319)

Honor is discovered to be nothing but a word, but Amintor still will not

think of revenge. This passage seems to suggest that if men together do not worship one big nothing, then they are left with many private nothings and the beasts that they are. If only for the sake of order, Amintor's resolution to be loyal is good.

Rhodes seems to be short on nobility. One might argue that Melantius and Amintor are champions of the Heroic Virtues; one or the other expresses concern for the beauty of friendship, loyalty to the throne, and family honor. But on a second look, it appears that they seek to serve their personal interests, though not nearly as much as the other characters in the play. Evadne admits that she is ambitious, loving with her ambition and not with her eyes. Even after her conversion, she seems to be motivated more by her own shame and her desire to gain Amintor's favor than by her desire to redeem her family name. In his designs to overthrow the King, Melantius seems to be motivated by the intrigue of his plot as well as by his loyalty to his friend; when Amintor had decided to seek revenge, he was dissuaded by Melantius who wanted to protect his own plan, and the reason for this exclusion of Amintor's will was neither discernible nor explained. (One possible explanation--any would be speculative--is that Melantius knew that the person who killed the King would die, and his past behavior would suggest that he would rather sacrifice a sister than a friend.) Amintor himself seems to be greatly concerned about the dignity of his person.⁵⁶

The movement of the play suggests that the characters' abandoning of the old order and following personal standards cannot avoid the deaths

⁵⁶See the discussion above of Amintor's concern for mockery.

of the protagonist; it can only lead to chaos. The play's final act, therefore, shows a new king reaffirming the old order and realizing that the office of the king is the moral cornerstone of the nation.

But Beaumont and Fletcher would surely not have us be naive. The perversions of the old code in the play and the furor they caused cannot be so easily forgotten. There is an "ominous duplicity" about our playwrights. If we look closely at the society they create, we can see that the fabric of the old society has been irrevocably torn. The old moral values produced the necessity of one absurd choice after another. All the characters in the play "break word with Heaven". To reaffirm the old moral order is to support the absurdity of dilemmas which necessitate sin regardless of how they are resolved, and to create anew the framework of a system already weakened by once having been broken.

CHAPTER V - CONCLUSION

All the plays discussed in this study are characterized by the element of surprise. There are no premonitions of disaster, from the beginning to the very end Beaumont and Fletcher's plays can surprise us; the denouements often present a twist of plot. Even in The Maid's Tragedy, which has no surprising denouement, action moves along in tense episodes and there are constant moral vasillations; thus the audience becomes intrigued about what the different characters will do next. It has been maintained throughout this study that the Jacobean world as well as the world of Beaumont and Fletcher plays belonged to an age characterized by incertitude and instability. The discussion of the plays in this study has attempted to show how Beaumont and Fletcher's plays have roots in their world, the world rent apart by clashing absolutes, distinguished from the worlds of Elizabethan plays by its "more exact, more searching, more detailed inquiry into moral and political questions and its interest in the anaylsis of the mysteries and perturbations of the human mind."⁵⁷

Our playwrights' desire to probe the mysteries of the human mind in their day led them to write about the doubts of their age. Doubts about the rights of kingship which were half-felt by the Jacobeans were given expression in Philaster. In A King and No King a direct clash between absolute values concerning incest and kingship led (in

⁵⁷F.P. Wilson, Elizabethan and Jacobean (Oxford, 1945), p. 20.

this study) to a consideration of the absurdity of enduring mental anguish as a result of anachronistic moral deliberations. In The Maid's Tragedy Beaumont and Fletcher again examined that absurdity and then went on to re-consider a possible validity for continuing to affirm conventional morality. Thus, the opinion of this writer is that John Danby is right to maintain that "Beaumont and Fletcher do not cater superficially, they shape for their audience the attitudes and postures the audience is not wholly aware yet that they will need."⁵⁸

In an effort to draw the thesis of this study to a clearer focus, the summary and conclusion of this study will be in answer to the following general question: Do the analysis of the plays and this writer's interpretations presented in this study lead to any distinctive vision of what Beaumont and Fletcher were trying to say about the nature of man and his struggle in the universe? To begin answering this question, a discussion of the nature of tragedy as it was understood by the Elizabethans and the nature of tragicomedy as we see it in Beaumont and Fletcher will be profitable.

Professor Cleanth Brooks has written that the nature of tragedy for the Elizabethans was such that it could "set up a conflict within the mind of the auditor--a conflict between the impulse to condemn the protagonist as he breaks the moral laws in which the audience believes and the impulse to sympathize with him in his struggle."⁵⁹ According

⁵⁸Danby, Poets on Fortune's Hill, p. 180.

⁵⁹Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition (Chapel Hill, 1939), p. 205.

to Brooks, "a latent tendency toward levity lies at the heart of tragedy."⁶⁰ That is, if the issues were less weighty and if the protagonist were treated with less sympathy, then tragedy, like all incongruous things, is potentially comic. If the essential dispartiy in tragedy is the tension within the audience between condemnation and sympathy, then it is necessary for the audience to have a standard by which to condemn and it is necessary for the characters in the plays to suffer because of their effort to maintain it or break it. It has been shown in this study that the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher challenge the validity of those standards necessary for tragedy, and their characters usually gain sympathy for their very human aspirations and failings, not for the nobility of their struggle nor the intensity of their sufferings.

Beaumont and Fletcher seemed to have perceived and made use of the latent tendency toward levity which lies at the heart of tragedy. In the words of Professor H.W. Wells, "they confuse the tragic and the comic spirit."⁶¹ "To tragedy they bring the complexity and artificiality proper to tragedy."⁶² Professor Ristine's astute observation of the criteria for distinguishing the tragicomic mean from comedy and tragedy can help in this discussion. He wrote: "It seems reasonable, then, considering the exalted and heightened tone that is characteristic of the tragicomic mean, to allow the test of style to enter into our criteria in distinguishing the form from comedy on the one hand, just as its severance from tragedy at the opposite end of the scale is to be

⁶⁰Brooks, p. 212.

⁶¹Wells, Elizabethan and Jacobean Playwrights, p. 114.

⁶²Wells, p. 115.

determined by the character of the denouement."⁶³

In tragedy, the play moves from the beginning compellingly toward death. Enlightenment comes in the process, and there is a kind of redemption of the political realm by the death. A delightful style and light tone are evidence that comedy moves inevitably toward reconciliation. But the tragicomic plays of Beaumont and Fletcher move from the beginning toward we know not what. In the Jacobean age which was no longer allowed to believe that man stood at the center of the universe or that kings were very like gods or that any one man (e.g. Aristotle) could be final authority on anything, death was a heavy price to pay for such characteristically human emotions as jealousy, ambition, sexual desires; in fact, death would be a heavy price to pay for the naturally human violation of any of the Heroic Virtues. In a sense, then, tragedy was impossible. So Beaumont and Fletcher gave their audience a confusion of tragedy and comedy. "In short, we find ourselves halfway between Othello's Cyprus and Viola's Illyria."⁶⁴ This confusion of the two spirits is simultaneously a nostalgic remembrance and a rejection of the conventions and beliefs which they imply. We have the contortions of the tragic process but no renewal, and we have the reconciliation of the comic process without its characteristic tone and style. This confusion, in a way, parallels the general confusion of the Jacobean era. It is evasive to regard Beaumont and Fletcher's art "as merely the creation of a 'fairy world'. Their plays strike roots deep into a real world--the

⁶³Ristine, English Tragicomedy, p. 123.

⁶⁴Wells, p. 122.

world of their time and of the embryonic Cavalier."⁶⁵ Theirs is "a world ready to split in every way which Beaumont and Fletcher's serious plays symbolize."⁶⁶ But their plays go on to depict the nonsense of a circumstantial mandate to choose among the clamorous absolutes when the absolutes themselves are no longer tenable and when awareness of universal human fallibility weighs heavily upon the consciousness. When one considers that Aristophanes created a similar confusion of comedy and tragedy and that contemporary movies do also, one might well contend that it is a recurrent theme in the literature of periods of great transition and that its necessity has deep roots in the human condition.

⁶⁵Danby, p. 161.

⁶⁶Danby, p. 161.

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