

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***The False One: John Fletcher and Philip Massinger*, ed. by Domenico Lovascio
(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022)**

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John Fletcher and his collaborators are undergoing a critical resurgence in recent years. 2021 saw the publication of Peter Malin's *Revived with Care: John Fletcher's Plays on the British Stage, 1885–2020*,¹ a comprehensive study of the modern performance history of plays in the Fletcher canon, minus his collaborations with Shakespeare. In the following year, José A. Pérez Díez's excellent edition of Fletcher and Philip Massinger's *Love's Cure* (1615)² was included in the *Revels Plays* series.³ Recent contributions to our understanding of the Fletcher canon in relation to conceptualizations of early modern authorship include Eoin Price's 'The Dearth of the Author: Philip Massinger and the Beaumont and Fletcher Folio',⁴ and studies in attribution have focused on Fletcher's work beyond his co-authored efforts with Shakespeare.⁵ Domenico Lovascio's important study, *John Fletcher's Rome: Questioning the Classics*,⁶ asks us to consider Fletcher's Roman plays as a group for the first time, offering unique insights into the dramatist's approach to the classics.

Alongside being a thoughtful, incisive scholar, Lovascio is a skilled editor, contributing to our understanding of not only Fletcher's canon but also promising to broaden our

¹ Peter Malin, *Revived with Care: John Fletcher's Plays on the British Stage, 1885–2020* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

² All dates of first performances throughout this review essay are taken from Martin Wiggins, in association with Catherine Richardson, *British Drama 1533-1642: A Catalogue* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

³ *Love's Cure, or the Martial Maid: By John Fletcher and Philip Massinger*, ed. by José A. Pérez Díez (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

⁴ Eoin Price, 'The Dearth of the Author: Philip Massinger and the Beaumont and Fletcher Folio', *Review of English Studies*, 74.313 (2023), 78-94.

⁵ Darren Freebury-Jones, 'John Fletcher's Collaborator on *The Noble Gentleman*', *Studia Metrica et Poetica*, 7.2 (2020), 43-60.

⁶ Domenico Lovascio, *John Fletcher's Rome: Questioning the Classics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

knowledge on the works of earlier playwrights such as Thomas Kyd and Robert Greene.⁷ His edition of Fletcher and Massinger's *The False One* for the *Revels Plays* series makes a major contribution to the editorial history of this drama and, perhaps, constitutes a move towards the holy grail of Fletcher studies, a badly needed edition of his collected works. *The False One* dramatizes the affair between Caesar and Cleopatra, holding a mirror up to King James's reign in its depiction of contemporary politics. Significantly, there has never been a standalone edition of this play, and readers will no doubt eagerly drink up the contents of this edition's comprehensive introduction.

Lovascio begins by exploring the dating and authorship of *The False One*. He points out that there is an 'absence of direct evidence' and infers 'the lower and upper limits' for the play's composition (p. 1) by consulting the cast list in the 1679 second Folio (F2), titled *Fifty Comedies and Tragedies Written by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher Gentlemen*. Noting that the actor Joseph Taylor did not join the King's Men playing company until April 1619, and that Nicholas Tooley died in June 1623, Lovascio whittles the timeframe down to April 1619 to April 1622. He then takes account of contemporary allusions and Fletcher and Massinger's use of sources to single out 1620 as the most probable year of the play's first production (pp. 1-3). Lovascio observes that the first and fifth acts are usually attributed to Massinger, and the remainder to Fletcher. He gives a brief account of the work of earlier scholars who determined the delineations of authorship on the basis of: Fletcher's propensity for the pronominal form 'ye' rather than 'you'; Massinger's preference for 'hath' over 'has'; and 'Fletcher's characteristic recourse' to 'contractions', such as 'i'th', 'o'th', 'h'as', and so forth (p. 3).

More recent findings in terms of prosody can be added: Marina Tarlinskaja notes that Massinger's rate of run-on lines in *The False One* is 'almost five times more' frequent than in Fletcher's portions of that play.⁸ Lovascio points out that the pattern of co-authorship is akin to *The Elder Brother* (1618) but other collaborations could have been provided. In my reading of the evidence, the opening of *The Little French Lawyer* (1620), which sets events in motion through the two characters of Dinant and Cleremont sharing expositional dialogue, can be confidently attributed to Massinger alone. When Massinger and Fletcher were reunited as co-authors for the composition of *The Double Marriage* (1622) after a hiatus, the former author resumed his practice of writing the opening acts. Whereas in several of their co-authored plays Massinger was responsible

⁷ *The Householder's Philosophy*, ed. by Domenico Lovascio, in *The Collected Works of Thomas Kyd*, General Editor Brian Vickers, Associate Editor Darren Freebury-Jones (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2024); *Orlando Furioso*, ed. by Domenico Lovascio, in *The Collected Plays of Robert Greene*, General Editor Darren Freebury-Jones (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2028).

⁸ Marina Tarlinskaja, *Shakespeare and the Versification of Elizabethan Drama 1561-1642* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), p. 220.

for the opening scenes, introducing characters to audiences and setting the plotlines in motion, Fletcher took responsibility for the opening act of *The Custom of the Country* (1619) and *The Prophetess* (1622). The dramatists also inverted their previous working methods by having Fletcher provide the opening scenes of *The Sea Voyage* (1622). Massinger was largely responsible for the main plot of *The Spanish Curate* (1622) — with particular emphasis on the legal and ethical ambiguities in scenes concerning Don Henrique’s pre-contract to Jacinta, with Bartolus acting as his attorney — and Fletcher the sub-plot revolving around Leandro. Fletcher and Massinger’s working methods during this period are fascinating and further explication on collaborations written closer in date might have illuminated their ‘shares of work’ in *The False One* and the ways in which the playwrights had a ‘full understanding of the entire play’ (p. 3).

Lovascio poses the question as to whether *The False One* was a Blackfriars play, noting that the dramatists emphasized ‘elements of performance’ that can be ‘readily connected’ with that venue, such as a masque (pp. 5-6). He concludes that the play ‘would have leveraged the specific power of the Blackfriars more effectively than that of the Globe’ (p. 10) and thereby narrows the window for its first performance even further to ‘the first quarter of 1620’ (p. 11). Lovascio then situates the play in the context of Fletcher and Massinger’s other Roman dramas (p. 11). He stresses that although the dramatists used Lucan’s epic poem *Pharsalia* as a source, ‘this does not necessarily mean that the playwrights were somehow advocating a republican alternative to the Jacobean monarchical system’ (p. 16), a subject to which he returns in discussions on the play’s critical reception. In the course of his investigation into the playwrights’ sources and influences, Lovascio observes that many of Fletcher’s plays not only converse with Shakespeare’s but are defined against them (pp. 29-30), with several characters in *The False One* summoning memories of Shakespeare’s Roman world, which would have been familiar to audiences attending productions in the commercial theatres.

In his exploration of the play’s critical reception, which was scant until the ‘end of the twentieth century’ (p. 39), Lovascio notes that ‘Scholars have attempted to root the play more firmly in the political context of its first appearance’, shedding light on ‘compelling aspects that had gone largely unnoticed before and contributing as a result to a more favourable overall critical reception’ (p. 40). The play’s performance history is, like its critical reception prior to the late twentieth century, limited, with its only revivals occurring in staged readings at the Blackfriars Playhouse in Staunton, Virginia in 2015 and at the Globe Education Sackler Studios in 2017 (p. 48). Surveying reviews of these productions, Lovascio highlights the ‘theatrical potential that the play still retains’ (p. 50).

Lovascio concludes his introduction with an analysis of the text of the play. He observes that ‘No manuscript of *The False One* is extant’ (p. 51) and uses the copy in the 1647 First Folio of Beaumont and Fletcher’s works (F1) located in the Pennsylvania State University as the edition’s copy-text. The play was first printed in the 1647 Folio and appears to have been produced by two compositors. Remarkably, no press variants were recorded in prior extensive collations of the text, meaning that ‘no further collation has been carried out for the present edition’ (p. 53). Lovascio reveals that a ‘number of characteristics of the F1 text’ suggest that ‘the play was printed from a private transcript’ made by Ralph Crane (p. 53), the scrivener employed by the King’s Men who also neatened texts and edited the divisions of acts and scenes for several plays in Shakespeare’s 1623 First Folio.

Lovascio’s edition of the text itself is impeccable. Noting that ‘F1 does not provide a list of roles’ and that ‘F2 gives an incomplete list’ (p. 62), he offers a far more satisfactory description of the characters than found in previous editions, complete with detailed notes on their historic counterparts. He also contextualizes Fletcher and Massinger’s characterization in relation to other depictions, such as in Samuel Daniel’s *Cleopatra* and the older heroine of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606), as well as providing perceptive comparisons of the text to accounts in Lucan and Plutarch. Lovascio even offers a painstaking Latin transcription of passages from Lucan’s poem in an appendix (pp. 197-201). His commentary notes also provide fascinating insights into original performance conditions, as in the stage direction, ‘*Enter SEPTIMIUS with a head*’ (2.1.0 SD). Surveying various theories on how stage heads might have looked, Lovascio proposes that the prop of Pompey’s head might very well have resembled King’s Men actor Richard Burbage, which ‘would have carried an aura of past greatness’ that might have been poignant for audiences a year after Burbage’s death (pp. 95-6).

Lovascio makes emendations that add clarity to the text and our understanding of Fletcher’s lexicon, such as Pothinus’s line, ‘The crown and sweet of thy Pharsalian labour’ (2.1.92), rather than F1’s reading, ‘sweat’, which fits more neatly into Fletcher’s use of ‘sweet’ as a noun in other plays (p. 101). Lovascio occasionally follows F2 rather than F1, as in, to offer just one example, the singular ‘noise’ rather than ‘noises’ in Caesar’s declarative, ‘I hear some noise’ (2.3.51), and makes expeditious use of readings contained in previous editions by scholars such as Alexander Dyce, Robert Kean Turner, and Henry Weber.

The edition concludes with a second appendix (pp. 202-4), detailing five songs in the play, four of which occur during the masque of Act 3 scene 4. A musical setting survives for the fifth song, which occurs in Act 1 Scene 2, and Lovascio provides a ‘transcription in modern notation with modernized text’ (p. 202), as well as an account of anthologies containing its lyrics. Lovascio’s transcription was checked by Jennifer Waghorn, an expert on music written for the King’s Men from 1609 to 1642. The result is an impressive feat of scholarship: a comprehensive edition worthy of an excellent, scholarly series. Lovascio’s edition is not only a significant milestone in the editorial history of the play; it reveals *The False One* as a drama that bristles with humour and spectacle worthy of performance, and offers wonderful insights into collaborative practises during the period and the presentation of Rome on the Jacobean stage.