

The Dearth of the Author: Philip Massinger and the Beaumont and Fletcher Folio

Eoin Price

In 1647, Humphrey Moseley and Humphrey Robinson published a folio collection of unpublished works which they attributed to Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, two writers famous for their collaborations from 1606 to 1613. But in affording Beaumont a place on the title page, the publishers misattributed the volume. Scholars now accept that Beaumont had very little direct input in the collection whereas Philip Massinger, who began collaborating with Fletcher soon after Beaumont's retirement, had a very significant, unacknowledged role in the collected plays. This essay offers the first extended discussion of why it was that Massinger was written out of this canon-defining volume. I argue first that Massinger was by many accounts a popular and vendible dramatist, whose omission from the folio had little to do with him having a poor reputation. Instead, I suggest that the reputation of the names Beaumont and Fletcher, established in the preceding decades, proved irresistible to the publishers. Furthermore, I argue that Massinger's reputation as a distinctive solo playwright also counted against him, making it harder to apprehend him as a prolific collaborator. Next, I demonstrate how the 1647 folio participated in a process of canonization which elided Massinger's significant collaborative contribution and discuss the distorting effect this has had on our understanding of Beaumont, Fletcher, Massinger, and playwrighting practice more broadly. I end by pointing towards some ways of rectifying the historical elision of Massinger's collaboration with Fletcher.

John Fletcher and Philip Massinger formed one of the most prolific and influential playwrighting partnerships in the history of English theatre. In sheer numerical terms, their partnership outweighed that of all other known playwrighting collaborations in the early modern period. Many of their collaborative plays appear to have found stage success in the authors' lifetimes and several endured long beyond their authors' deaths. Their plays influenced later generations of playwrights: tragicomedy, the mode of dramatic writing they helped to popularize, became the principal theatrical form of the seventeenth century. Despite this, Fletcher is

Fletcher and Massinger are known to have co-authored approximately 20 extant plays. Other more famous collaborators worked together much less frequently: Beaumont and Fletcher collaborated on eight plays; Middleton and Rowley co-authored six; Middleton and Dekker worked together on five dramatic entertainments and Fletcher and Shakespeare co-wrote three plays in partnership. These numbers are not intended to be precise but nonetheless give the impression of just how frequently Fletcher and Massinger worked together. I have drawn my figures, here and elsewhere from Martin Wiggins, in association with Catherine Richardson, British Drama, 1533–1642: A Catalogue, 9 vols (Oxford, 2016–2019).
On seventeenth-century tragicomedy see Nancy Klein Maguire, Reginide and Restoration: English Tragicomedy, 1660–1671

On seventeenth-century tragicomedy see Nancy Klein Maguire, Reginide and Restoration: English Tragicomedy, 1660–1671 (Cambridge, 1992), 1; Michael Dobson, The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660–1769 (Oxford, 1992), 21–2.

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