

Fletcherian Dramatic Achievement

A Study in the Mature Plays of John Fletcher (1579-1625)

Pavel Drábek

*a Torch burning: a Boy, in a white
and Arming Flowers: After Hyacinth,
her Tresses, bearing a wheaten Gar-
land, between two other Nymphs with
their heads. Then Hipolita the Bride,
her holding a Garland over her
hanging.) After her Emilia hol-*



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To the Reader

This book was completed in 2002, as my PhD thesis at Charles University, Prague, under the supervision of Martin Hilský. During the viva I received valuable comments from my supervisor as well as my second readers, Lois Potter and Zdeněk Stříbrný. At that moment I made a solemn vow that I would revise my thesis and publish it. Since then, however, personal and professional commitments have prevented me from doing it. In my other work, I continued research and further studies in what the thesis started. By the time the plan for a revision and a publication got a clearer shape, it came to little short of writing an entirely new book—one that would be, in fact, polemic with this one.

It is especially Chapters 1 to 3 that would need to be reworked radically. The envisioned new book would provide much more support in terms of argument and more recent research findings concerning theatre documents—it is especially Tiffany Stern's *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2010), Andrew Gurr's *Shakespeare's Opposites: The Admiral's Company 1594-1625* (Cambridge, 2009) as well as the new editions of some of the Fletcherian plays in the Arden Early Modern Drama series, such as Suzanne Gossett's edition of *Philaster* (2009), Brean Hammond's edition of Lewis Theobald's *'pseudo-Cardenio'* of 1727, *Double Falsehood* (2010), and Clare McManus's forthcoming edition of *The Island Princess*. In the final chapters, the new book would include more historical material concerning the pre-Classicist culture of *frivolité* and the nature of the early Baroque arts in England and on the Continent—to which John Fletcher and his most active collaborator Philip Massinger were very sensitive and to which their plays arguably belong as its key representatives. Revising the thesis would also mean exorcizing the inconsolable angry young man who wrote the thesis eight years ago. In proofs, I was trying to play down the uncompromising tone of my earlier self. The result, however, still bears many of the traces.

I would like to thank all my colleagues who have helped and supported me, my supervisor Martin Hilský, my two readers, Lois Potter and Zdeněk Stříbrný and Laurie Maguire, who supervised my work during my OSI/Chevening scholarship at Magdalen College, Oxford in 2000/2001. Thanks go to others who have been important in my career: John Russell Brown, Milada Franková, Petr Osolobě, Martin Procházka, Eva Stehlíková and Jeff Vanderziel. I am also grateful to friends and colleagues who have encouraged me in resuscitating my thesis, persuading me that there were more than about twelve people in the world interested

in John Fletcher. Without trying to name all who have encouraged me, I would like to thank Pascale Aebischer, Christian Billing, David Drozd, Bridget Escolme, Joachim Frenk and Clare McManus. Special thanks go to my friend, director Ivan Rajmont, who invited me to give a talk on Fletcher during the rehearsals of the first Czech production of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (in Martin Hilský's translation) at the National Theatre in Prague in 2008. Ivan Rajmont and Martin Urban, the dramaturg of the production, made me write a long study of Fletcherian drama for the programme brochure of the production, and are indirectly responsible for my realization that my PhD thesis was not only a volume of old papers. Their interest in my study and in Fletcher as a dramatist rekindled and fuelled my old passion for the topic. I have also received great support from my students at Masaryk University and as a visiting lecturer at Charles University and DAMU (Academy of Performing Arts, Prague). Most importantly, without the support of my wife Hana, this book would never have come into existence—'I cannot heave | My heart into my mouth'.



Introduction

The true and primary intent of the Tragedians and Comedians of old, was to magnifie Virtue, and to depress Vice; And you may observe throughout the Works of incomparable Johnson, excellent Shakespear, and elegant Fletcher, &c they (however vitu[p]lerated by some streight-laced brethren not capable of their sublimity,) aim at no other end

J. S. in 'To the Reader', *The prince of priggs revels* (1651)

Critics have to spend half their time reiterating whatever ridiculously obvious things the critics of their age have found it necessary to forget [...] There is something essentially ridiculous about critics, anyway: what is good is good without our saying so, and beneath all our majesty we know this.

(Jarrell 1991: 152)

My thesis is a dramatic and theatrical study of the mature plays of the Beaumont and Fletcher Folio. It proceeds from the observation that most attention has been devoted to the early plays (written by about 1613) and very little to the later ones. This work argues that it is only in the later plays—from about 1613 till 1625/26—that both Fletcher's unaided plays and the collaborative works of his *atelier* reach the state of 'dramatic maturity'. An explicit aim of my work is to provide a critical reassessment of this prolific, popular and—for a long time—revered body of dramas, and suggest possible paths of producing them in today's context. The approaches to the plays vary, from the practical, theatrical discussion of staging and interpretative producing, through an analysis of the dramatic methods and techniques, to intrinsic dramatic interpretations. The ultimate ambition is to uncover in the plays the potential for good theatre.

I

Throughout the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth centuries, John Fletcher was one of the three great playwrights, one of the 'Shakespeare-Jonson-Fletcher Triumvirate'—as Oliphant observes (1927, Ch. 1). However, Fletcher's fame gradually waned. He was criticized for immorality and lack of style in the time of classicist arbiters, who came to dictate the taste in the mid-eighteenth century, and in the Romantic nineteenth century, which had little sympathy for Fletcher's unpoetic poetry and his treatment of noble themes.¹ The situation changed little in

1 It is perhaps no random coincidence that Fletcherian plays lost public and critical favour

the Modernist times of early twentieth century, outraged by the plays' deficiencies in realistic mimesis, the continuing lack of poetry and originality in them, and—most importantly—bewildered by the finding that, in comparison to Shakespeare and in terms of Shakespearean drama—which had come to be touchstones of what is good—the Fletcherian plays were not Shakespeare, and therefore simply not as good.

Apart from these unsympathetic aesthetic objections, the plays suffered for their 'fatherlessness': the collection of some 55 plays, known as the Beaumont and Fletcher canon, was a body far too diverse to be dealt with in terms of the ruling biographical criticism.² Much critical energy was spent on the issue of disintegrating the canon into recognizable personal shares, thus transferring the question of critical analysis onto the well-established, stereotypical discussion of the work and its literary creator. Even though there were attempts to single out one or two of the many collaborators—be it Beaumont (Gayley 1914) or Massinger (Chelli 1923 and 1926)—and present them as victims of the dramatic and versatile malefactor Fletcher, who (as it were) 'corrupted' their personal style, the studies never satisfactorily accounted for the quality of the individual plays, let alone approached the plays as such. Many of these critical blind alleys are still surviving, and the early modern popularity and appraisal of Fletcher has been explained by the plays' putative servility, debased, popular taste, or political importance.

However, a period of some 150 years is not the lifetime of an ephemeral, sensational, or other time-serving play. As a starting point of this study, I will assume that the popularity Fletcher was getting was deserved. His contemporaries and the following generations who pronounced 'his loud memorie' (*The Chances*, Prologue 12) had a more profound reason; his plays *were* an achievement of the age.³ Similarly, there was a more profound reason why the eighteenth, and ultimately the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, grew to dispraise Fletcher. I do not wish primarily to defend the work against the just or unjust criticism it has provoked; my aim is to look into the dramatic qualities of the plays, and try to uncover the achievement *in situ*—so to speak—and with as little regard for modern aesthetic presumptions as can be. That is not to say that my approach is counter-aesthetic. The ultimate aim is purely practical: to uncover the 'stageability' of these plays, that is, what makes these plays *good plays* for the theatre of today, and the potential to give delight to the present (or future) audiences.

at a time marked by the rising influence of Idealist thought. Chapter 2 on 'Theatre and Theory' discusses this peculiar relation between Idealism and Fletcherian drama.

- 2 Brooks (2000) deals with the issue of 'readability' of the author and of the marketing manoeuvres that Humphrey Moseley felt compelled to undertake in order to secure a financial success for his edition; he needed, as Brooks claims, names that would sell. See also below.
- 3 All quotations of the Beaumont and Fletcher plays are from Fredson Bowers' 10-volume edition *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, Cambridge UP, 1966–96. Dating of the plays is Gordon McMullan's (1994: 267–69). Quotations from Shakespeare's plays are taken from the Folio text (electronic version at Chadwyck-Healey); the line numbers are those of the Oxford edition (eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor).

II

Fletcherian plays have suffered from substantial critical neglect, and a rather tendentious one at that. Critics have analyzed only a narrow range of plays, as I outline below. It is only in the past decade that Fletcherian drama has received more unbiased critical attention. This new phase can be dated since McMullan's groundbreaking political study on Fletcher (McMullan 1994), the completion of Fredson Bowers' monumental 10-volume edition of *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon* (1966–96), and Lois Potter's truly even-handed Arden edition of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1997). One might add Kathleen McLuskie's essay on the playwrights of 1613–1642 in the fourth volume of *The Revels History of Drama in English* (1981), which is invaluable, though still a little bit depreciative in approaching Fletcherian drama.

Apart from a few works, it is a rather striking fact that most criticism—regardless of the time in which it was written—has devoted a landslide majority of attention to the early plays, such as Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607), Fletcher's *The Faithful Shepherdess* (1608–09), or the three notorious collaborations of theirs, *Philaster* (1608–09), *The Maid's Tragedy* (1610) and *A King and No King* (1611).⁴ Fletcher occasionally comes in with his two unaided tragedies, *Valentinian* (1610–12) and *Bonduca* (1612–14), and his Shakespearean collaborations, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613) and *Henry VIII* (1613), which are, however, mostly to be sought under Shakespeare. This predilection for the early—and as I claim, immature, and often juvenile—plays has its reasons. In most cases it is the overriding myth of Shakespeare that slants the approaches. Somehow, to relate Fletcherian plays to the yet-living Shakespeare gives the criticism a sufficient *raison d'être*.⁵ The later plays are mostly subsumed under the cosy category of the Jacobean Decadence (Ellis-Fermor 1958).⁶

An easy way of disposing of them has been to charge them with a lack of originality. Fletcherian dramatic work has often been ruled out as mechanical or perfunctory. Several mature plays rework older material; some of them have even

4 Rita Banerjee's 1997 PhD thesis on *The ideology of John Fletcher's tragicomedies* proceeds from a very similar observation; however—as her abstract explains—her approach is essentially political:

The general categorizations of John Fletcher as an entertainer and an ardent royalist suggest the need for a reassessment of his works. This necessity is enhanced by the fact that of the more than fifty plays that Fletcher wrote, only the earlier collaborations with Beaumont have received their fair share of critical attention, while the solo plays of Fletcher and those written in collaboration with Massinger have been relatively neglected. Focusing chiefly on the latter plays, I attempt to demonstrate that a contextual study illuminates the antiestablishment and oppositional character of Fletcher's plays. [...] The tragicomedy was an apt vehicle for voicing subversive sentiments, while nominally validating accepted political ideas through ironic, self-questioning resolutions. (Banerjee 1997, PhD thesis abstract)

5 For an observation on the commercialization of Shakespearean critical produce in relation to his contemporaries see Gary Taylor's 2000 article 'C:/wp/file.txt 05:41 10-07-98'.

6 For a discussion of stereotypes in approaching early modern drama, see Chapter 2 and Lois Potter's essay (2001) cited there.

dramatic sources—just like Shakespeare had his. Yet, in the case of Fletcher and his collaborators, criticism has mostly opted not for the favourable view of profitable reworking of dramatic archetypes, but rather for the dismissive verdict of epigonism or even parasitism. Reading Fletcher has been, as it were, biased by an underlying query ‘why bad’, rather than ‘why good’. The plays almost automatically became perceived as inferior repetitions of older, original themes, regardless of the fact that originality (or inventiveness) was an aesthetic demand of a much later date.

So—to give a brief outline—Coburn Freer in his 1981 work on *The Poetics of Jacobean Drama* devotes only a single page to Fletcher’s dramatic poetry (58–59), not quoting a single example, only the prefatory verses to the 1647 Folio. Later he gives Fletcher a short mention, quoting 9 lines from *Philaster* (dating it 1620!), and that only to show them ‘incapable of achieving [the] “intensity” and “fire”’ of Webster’s plays (Freer 1981: 202–03). However, Freer’s book is an extreme example of the neglect. As for the mature plays, Philip J. Finkelpearl (1990) devotes one chapter (Ch. 11 ‘Fletcher’s politics after Beaumont’, 212–43) to them, and he analyzes Fletcher’s unaided *Valentinian*, *The Loyal Subject* (1618), *The Humorous Lieutenant* (1619), *A Wife for a Month* (1624), and briefly *The Island Princess* (1621). Peter Ure, in his book of essays on Elizabethan and Jacobean drama (1974), mentions only *Valentinian* and that in the context of male friendship. As far as Fletcherian tragicomedy is concerned, the relevant contributions to Nancy Klein Maguire’s collection *Renaissance Tragicomedy* (1987) limit themselves to the notorious and problematic *The Faithful Shepherdess*, *Philaster* and *A King and No King*, and to cursory mentions of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* and *The Maid’s Tragedy*; out of the mature plays, *The Mad Lover* (1616) receives a paragraph, and *The Humorous Lieutenant* and *Women Pleased* (1618) each a sentence. William P. Williams, in his essay on Fletcherian tragicomedy, dealing with the use of foils in the later plays, claims that ‘no matter what guise the foil character, or characters, comes in, his or her deployment will be essentially what we have seen in *A King and No King*’ (Williams 1987: 153). Since he mentions only *Women Pleased* and *The Mad Lover*, he indirectly denies Fletcherian tragicomic style much (if any) development. David Farley-Hills’ outline on *Jacobean Drama*, published in 1998(!), devotes two chapters to Fletcherian plays, dividing it to ‘The Beaumont Period: 1606–13’ (163–82), and ‘Fletcher Without Beaumont’ (182–92), in which he mentions *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Fletcher’s unaided city comedy *Wit Without Money* (1614), *Valentinian*, and also *The Woman’s Prize, or The Tamer Tam’d* (1611), comparing it to Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, and linking *Bonduca* with *Cymbeline* because both treat Roman-British history.

Apart from the few books mentioned in the beginning, little attention—or rather virtually none—has been devoted to the thirty-odd plays from the last ten years of Fletcher’s career as the first dramatist of the King’s Men (Fletcher died in 1625). This gap has been partly filled by (generally inaccessible) PhD theses. However, none—as far as I know—has been dealing with the dramatic achievement of Fletcherian plays, that is to say, with their qualities as plays for practical theatre,

not for the study-room. In this respect, one may include also Gordon McMullan's works, which are essentially concerned with historical and political implications of the plays. My study attempts a dramatic reassessment of the mature Fletcherian plays, which should help to fill in the gap in critical writing.

III Outline of the Method

In essence, my approach is intrinsic; it tries to uncover in the plays their potential for the theatre. It is naturally concerned with historical appropriateness but not primarily with authentic, historical circumstances. It tries to reconstruct the universal dramatic quality of the plays; the primary task then is not so much to find what made the plays so popular, but rather what can be done *nowadays* to value the plays as good plays. My initial assumption is that they were and are good, that their one-time popularity was not only an ephemeral matter but shared something with the pleasure which the theatre is capable of giving at any historical moment.

There are, theoretically speaking, two ways of getting closer to a past taste. The first is the *historicist* one: to re-create the context in which a certain work of art came to existence. This is the 'constructive' one, summing up the discrete historical facts into a 'thick description' (to use Clifford Geertz's term, borrowed by New Historicists; see Kermode 2001). The other approach is the 'continuous' one: to remove what the development has added, or taken away from what we live in. As for the former, it is purely theoretical and—from the epistemological point—impossible: meaning is always present; there is nothing like a meaning in the past. In practice, the historicist approach is transferred, or delegated, to the present one. The interpreter attempts to *live in* the historic situation by imagining what was or could have been; naturally, all this takes place now. Likewise, if the plays have the potential to be good in the theatre, the historic reason why they *were* so three or four hundred years ago is secondary. Therefore, in approaching the 'past taste' for Fletcherian drama, my study necessarily points to the obstacles which *we create* and which separate us from a more even-handed evaluation of Fletcherian drama.

One such broad category of obstacles are—what I call—the modern stage conventions of realism, a notion sufficiently anachronistic in respect to early modern drama, as Chapter 1 claims. Much contemporary theatre is ruled by realistic impersonation and stage production, which is the heritage of the demiurgic drama of Romanticism (sic), the theatre of Ibsen or Stanislavsky, and of the later developments in their traditions. Necessarily these theatrical habits form a barrier to the early modern styles, which are marked by 'epic-ness', and figurative and fragmentary onstage presentation. Much modern theatre, blinded by the technological developments of staging possibilities, has tacitly assumed that realism (or naturalism) is the ultimate perfection of representing world. Jacobean drama knew better: the everyday detail had the power to bear a presence of the universal. Realism can be enriched by figurativeness.

A related set of modern conventions are the conventions of ideology, or in other words, predilection for a political theatre of strong and ideologically charged

interpretations, a tradition originating in the dominance of Platonic philosophy in much modern thought. Chapter 2 deals with the modern fashion of ideological art and criticism, and points out the maladjustment of these approaches to Fletcherian drama and its characteristic, seeming ideological ‘void’. In connection to the issue, Clifford Leech observes (though in a more concrete sense) that

We do not know Middleton’s or Fletcher’s *Weltanschauung* as we know Webster’s or Ford’s or Chapman’s. We know what interested them in the human situation, but we have no evidence for their ultimate interpretations of it. (Leech 1962: 113)

Perhaps it should be added that political and ideological criticism has, nevertheless, come to certain conclusions in the question. Lawrence B. Wallis (1947) sees Fletcher *et al* as the servile and loyal ‘Entertainers to the Jacobean Gentry’, while more recent approaches point to the subversive nature of their plays (McMullan 1994, Banerjee 1997, Rizzoli 1999). Whatever the conclusion is, in theatre it is never absolute; the spectators experience their own play, and judge for themselves, and a good play, if left in a sufficiently uninterpreted state, is relevant to what the spectators invest it with.

However, modern producers tend to narrow down the play’s significance to meet their ideological agenda. There is an unsated desire on the part of the producers to have complete control over the material they present.⁷ Yet, the audience always know more than the actor, the director and the dramaturge; or, as Fletcher puts it:

[*Leocadia*.] they that look on
See more than we that play

(*Love’s Pilgrimage* 3.2.227–28)

One part of my approach is a study of the processes of early modern dramatizing (Chapters 3 to 5). An issue in question, particularly in connection to the Beaumont and Fletcher canon, is of course that of collaboration. Although much has been written on how collaboration worked, it remains still an open question, if not a mystery. In general, one may say that early modern collaboration is particularly ‘resistant to theory’ (to paraphrase Paul de Man); there is something seemingly paradoxical (and thus, mysterious) as well as pragmatically workaday about collaboration that prevents theorists from accepting it for what it is: a simple fact.

⁷ Cf. with the ‘*dévoir*’ of structuralist semiology of the French schools of the 1960s and 70s.

IV Fletcherian Collaboration

*That no man knowes where to divide your wit,
 Much lesse your praise; you, who had equall fire,
 And did each other mutually inspire;
 Whether one did contrive, the other write,
 Or one fram'd the plot, the other did indite;
 Whether one found the matter, th'other dresse,
 Or the one disposed what th'other did expresse*

Commendatory verses by Jasper Maine in the 1679 Folio

Though collaboration is an acknowledged fact of Renaissance dramatic writing (see McMullan), how could five, or more, playwrights actually collaborate on a text?⁸

(Knowles 1999: 116)

It takes hundreds of pages before most theorists acknowledge and eventually accept an obvious thing. It shows the conservative attachment to the existing subjects of study and the acknowledged 'truths' about them. Every novelty, however obvious and *real*, requires kilobytes of proof and evidence. Metaphorically speaking, accepting a new notion is like overcoming distrust when meeting a future friend. The actual issue is the resistance of theorists (as people) to new things, and it has little to do with the fact that the novelty in question is a *fact*, and whether it *has* actually happened is a different issue. Dramatic collaboration in early modern English drama is a case in point.

Gordon McMullan (1994), in his chapter on Collaboration, expresses the unstructured and unwieldy reality of a collaborative work, which in essence resists the neat categories with which criticism wants to classify and 'subdue' it:

The collaborative process—meeting in taverns to agree on plots, writing separate scenes apart and then coming together to edit, handling material to one playwright to finish and copy out—is a hermeneutical nightmare. It is in fact difficult to achieve an appropriate working definition of collaboration. Fletcher has always been seen to break the Aristotelian rules for unified drama and to defy the requirement to paste over the cracks. (McMullan 1994: 135)

Only a couple of lines later, when mentioning the hypothesis that Fletcher, years after Beaumont's death, sometimes revised and completed a play that had been drafted by Beaumont (and possibly himself) several years earlier, McMullan expresses a somewhat helpless regret at the benumbing critical discourse that—in this case particularly—fails to capture the nature of reality:

This kind of collaboration with the dead [*i.e.* the dead Beaumont] is characteristic of Fletcher in other ways, most notably in his insistence upon reworking Shakespearean material and returning to generic and thematic questions first broached in actual collaborative work years earlier. In light of such complications, I would contend that

8 The reference is to Gordon McMullan's "'Our whole life is like a play": collaboration and the problem of editing', *Textus*, 9 (1996), 437–60.

there has yet been no approach to the reading of Renaissance drama which deals adequately with the collaborative processes which characterize the writing in which Fletcher and every other Jacobean playwright was involved. (McMullan 1994: 135)

Part of the barriers in solving the issue of collaboration rests in the post-Romantic conception of the author and that of *novelty*. The Romantic author is believed to receive divine inspiration and produces a unique, idiosyncratic and unrepeatable work of art. The falsity of this assumption has often been observed (Stillinger 1991). Romantic artists often and enthusiastically spread this *aura* of heavenly inspiration, fashioning themselves to promote—what Jack Stillinger calls—the ‘myth of the solitary genius’. Although the Romantic (Idealist) origin of this notion has been recognized, the very act of creation of a work of art has retained an air of deferential admiration for something irrationally semi-divine, at least in the general consciousness.

This conception of the author upholds a tight bond between the inspired author and his invention, and places the author in a solitary position—that of the ultimate *owner* and *holder* of the ‘copyright’ for his invention. As such, the invention markedly bears the author’s unique traits. Vice versa, the uniqueness of the author is inherently present in his creation. The semi-divine status of both the work and the author creates a critical impasse; to approach the process of creation of a work of art pragmatically, in its down-to-earth reality, would be, to many, a trespass against the myth that encompasses art.

The Jacobean era gave birth to the modern conception of the author—or at least its early, pre-Romantic stages. It was Ben Jonson in particular, who strove to establish for himself a ‘proto-copyright’ when he published his self-erected monument in 1616, immodestly named *The Workes*. (Before him it was only Chaucer whose writings were published as collected ‘works’.) No wonder Jonson gained much scorn from his contemporaries for doing so. One of the concrete cases of building his own public image is his *Sejanus’ Fall*, originally a collaborative work. In *The Workes*, Jonson exerted considerable efforts to dispose of the presence of a ‘second hand’ in the writing.⁹ Jonson is, characteristically, an extreme case in this, and as Douglas A. Brooks notes in his book on early modern collaboration (Brooks 2000), Thomas Heywood’s almost unconcerned and resigned approach is a much more representative instance of early modern authorship.¹⁰

9 On the issue of Jonson’s *The Workes* see Brooks 2000. This passage relies mostly on this book. Douglas A. Brooks captures the problems of sole and joint authorship, and outlines the reasons for the gradual ‘loss of ground’ for the Beaumont and Fletcher Folio, which was not based on a single author, as Jonson’s or Shakespeare’s folios had been, but on an idealised friendship. The lacuna between the multiple authors came to widen to such an extent that it became as if ‘illegible’.

10 Shakespeare is sometimes thought to be similarly unconcerned about the publications of his plays. This inference is not only rather speculative but also rather unlikely; a much more probable alternative is that publications were produced in considerable negligence and haste, and the publishers—as is sometimes the case even nowadays—often did not care for the author’s meticulousness and published it in the ‘raw’ state; it is always much more comfortable and faster (and therefore cheaper) not to care for proof-readings.

Jonson's effort to establish himself as a classic provides important indices concerning collaboration. In the Prologue to *Volpone* he comments on his unaided authorship of the play, which was—as he claims—written

without a coadjutor,
Novice, journeyman, or tutor.

(Volpone, *Prologue* 17–18)

Brian Parker, the Revels Plays editor, explains the terms Jonson uses, claiming that they refer to

various modes of collaboration: *coadjutor*, an equal collaborator; *novice*, an apprentice, writing parts under a master's direction; *journeyman*, a hack, more than a novice but less than a master, brought in for a limited responsibility; *tutor*, director, superintendent, and corrector of others' work. (Parker 1999: 86n.)

This explanation is thorough and sounds plausible. However, Brian Parker gives no reference to the source of this knowledge. One might only wish that he were right; as it stands, on second thought, it seems to be a conjecture. John W. Creaser, in his 1978 edition, is cautious and precise in his explanation, remarking that

theatre then required a large repertoire rapidly, and collaboration between playwrights was common, as many as five working at one play. Jonson himself had collaborated several times. Little is certain about *how* dramatists collaborated, and hence whether Jonson is mentioning four clearly distinguished methods of working. A coadjutor was probably an equal who was assigned a substantial part of a play, and a journeyman a hack who cobbled together other men's work. (Creaser 1978: 208)

This seems more reasonable, although it says less about what is meant by the possible four categories. Jonson's remark in the Prologue might have been a piece of boastful enumeration, transferring metaphorically trade categories onto (the similarly mercantile) dramatic produce. Or, he could have used terminology current in the theatre 'industry' of the time. Maurice Chelli (1926), like Brian Parker, supposes there was a 'maître' who supervised the collaborative play. If the dramatist's profession was indeed modelled on guilds—as Jonson's terminology may suggest—this hypothesis would gain substantial support.

Early modern collaboration has been sometimes likened to Hollywood film industry of the 1930s and 40s (Rabkin 1976: 10; McLuskie 1981: 169). Jack Stillinger, in his work on collaboration and the 'myth of the solitary genius', discusses hack writers of Hollywood studios, quoting one of them, Donald Ogden Stewart, who comments on the ways in which a screenplay came to existence:

'The producers had the theory that the more writers they had to work on the scripts, the better the scripts would be. It was the third or fourth writer that always got the screen credit. [...] It became a game to be the last one before they started shooting so that you would not be eased out of the screen credit.' (Quoted in Stillinger 1991: 177–78)

In a way, the last collaborator, who gets 'screen credit', becomes the 'guarantee' of the script's quality. There could have been something of this logic even in

early modern collaborative processes; several collaborative plays were published under the name of one author, probably the 'master' or the reviser who 'updated' old play-texts. (Was this the case of *Pericles*, *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, *Mucedorus* and other of the Shakespeare Apocrypha?)¹¹

Whatever was the case with the master dramatist, it does not account for the process of collaboration itself. It does not provide answers to Norman Rabkin's questions on particularly Fletcherian collaborations:

Did someone farm out parts of a play to various authors? Was one writer in charge? What explicit descriptions of the desired effects of plot, rhetoric, characterization, and ambiance insured that play after play, regardless of the personnel employed in its assembly, would faithfully match Professor Waith's generic description of the lot? (Rabkin 1976: 10)

As he further observes, collaborations 'cannot have been a job of patching together plays of inadequate length'; the collaborators 'must have worked together intimately from the inception' to create a unified work (Rabkin 1976: 11). Likewise, collaborators were not only professional dramatists—professional in the sense of subjecting their abilities to a task—but also masters in 'the great Elizabethan disappearing act' (Rabkin 1976: 12).

As it was part of the workmanship to become invisible in the final product, I will assume the integrity of a play without looking into what breaks it up. The disintegrators of the Beaumont and Fletcher canon, who were trying to separate individual shares, attempted a task that is essentially against the nature of the plays, seeking individuality in works that tended to avoid it. The initial, taken-for-granted assumption of the disintegrating efforts is that each collaborator has his personal and unique style and traceable features; this is of course the ideal of a Romantic poet. Regardless of Romantic ideals the reality of collaboration is much more simple and pragmatic, and therefore insuperably complex for disintegrators.

Apart from the above search for invisibility, there is one more and much deeper factor that determines the specificity of collaboration: in writing it is both common and necessary to take over motifs, situations, techniques, and expressions from existing works, even without trespassing on what is considered plagiarism. This constant process of taking-over has several reasons. The readers (or audience) have to find the new work relevant and to-the-point in the context in which

11 Douglas A. Brooks (2000) provides a slightly different reading, suggesting the marketing impulses for giving one name only; one name—and presumably the best-known one—is 'readable' enough, and much more 'marketable' than a group of names. Humphrey Moseley, the publisher of the Beaumont and Fletcher Folio of 1647, ventured on his 'sentimental attempt to monumentalize a relationship between two playwrights that death had done its best to break up' (Brooks 2000: 145), although both the preceding publications of collected 'Workes'—Will Stansby's publication of the Jonson collection of 1616, and Blount and Jaggard's of the Shakespeare First Folio of 1623—featured one single author. Brooks discusses 'the struggle between singular and collaborative authorship' in the thirty years leading up to the 1647 Folio (Brooks 2000: 170).

they find themselves. That is to say, it has to ‘communicate’ not only in respect of reality and the audience’s (perhaps conventionalized) sense of what it is, but it has to reflect previous attempts to tackle it. Thus, one important part of a new work is the genre in which it is written (in case of prose), or the conventions of the theatre that produces it. The new work necessarily becomes also a certain *riposte* to what has preceded it. It is therefore impossible to speak of originality in the Romantic sense.¹² Modern criticism tries to put up with the seeming heterogeneity of the work by the overused notion of intertextuality; however, this conception captures only the most superficial aspect of the fact, without getting at the core. In all its aspects, communication goes by repetition, and not only the inner one (necessary for stylistic cohesion, coherence, and overall consistency) but also by a repetition of existing, customary linguistic and extralinguistic phenomena. In this respect, it is naive to assume a strictly personal style although authors have undeniable idiosyncratic features; an ideal personal style (fully and securely recognizable) would be equivalent to autism.

In what follows, I will resign attempts to ‘uncover’ the individual authors of the text. Without falling into the extremism of the deconstructionist impersonal author, whenever speaking of Fletcher, I will primarily speak not of the historical figure of John Fletcher (1579–1625) but about the originator of the play, or perhaps the collective author in the above sense. One may never know for certain if the supposed originator of a play gave ‘a speech in the last scene of the last act’ to someone else to write or not.¹³ To take an example, *The Woman Hater*, as a play of human folly, could have been informed by the tradition of the classical comedy (and the Aristotelian notion that comedy should purge human folly); if this were so, it would be a case of using sources, or of classical influence. Alternatively, it could have been in reality suggested by the knowledgeable Jonson, who had considerable influence on the early Beaumont and Fletcher; in that case it would be, strictly speaking, an instance of collaboration. Be it the one or the other, I will assume that the line ‘Here comes an other remnant of folly: I must dispatch him too’ (*The Woman Hater* 5.2.110) was written by *the author*, whoever brought it into Beaumont’s (or Fletcher’s?) mind.

IV

Chapter 3, on ‘Plats and Plays’, reopens the question of author-plots, or plot charts (*plats* or *plots*, in early modern English), and collects indices that would support the hypothesis that it was on the basis of the Plat that playwrights collaborated

12 Compare Foucault’s notion of *episteme* as the impersonal context that more-or-less dictates the creation of a work of art; a related notion is that of the ‘dead’ author of Roland Barthes (1968). For older analogies see Chapters 9 and 17 in Wellek and Warren’s *Theory of Literature* (1942; Wellek and Warren 1993: 94–109; 226–37).

13 The quotation is taken from Thomas Dekker’s testimony about the writing of *Keep the Widow Waking* during the trial for offence. Quoted from Bentley (1971: 233).

on a play. Most critics admit that there must have been some kind of preliminary planning. However, the practical, physical realization remains unspoken of.

Even if the hypothesis of Plats turns to be untrue, it has been observed that Plats have 'a definite value *per se*. For not only do the charts indicate the contents of specific scenes but suggest graphically certain relationships as well' (Dunkel 1925: 9). This virtue of perspicuity will be used for another instance of collaboration of the consecutive type: the exegesis preceding a potential present-day production. Some of my interpretive efforts will focus on structural patterns, using an *ad hoc* Plat to approach the 'fractal structure' of individual plays.

V

Dramatic criticism is overly concerned with the diachronic aspect of plays, that is, with the 'phylogeny' of a certain phenomenon, trying to trace back its gradual development in consecutive historical phases. As has been said, the approach of this work will not be historicist in this sense; it will rather try to uncover the layers as they are present now. In this particular case, the objective is to unveil the *contemporary potential* of the plays and of the issues treated. In other words, I am concerned with the synchronous aspect, or—if you will—with the 'ontogeny' of drama. In the middle chapters (Chapters 4 and 5, on 'The Composition of *Bonduca*'), my aim is to look into the process of dramatizing. There are virtually no extant 'foule papers' for the plays analyzed, a rare exception being the case of *Bonduca*, which survives in two versions: the Folio text of 1647 and the manuscript, claiming to be a transcript of the author's foul papers (British Library Add. MS 36758, reprinted by W. W. Greg in *The Malone Society Reprints*).

Presumably, in the process of composition, the plotter-dramatist revises his previous work and modifies it. From today's perspective, these compositional palimpsests are virtually illegible, though sometimes one may assume that certain traits are vestiges of earlier versions, later reworked. My attempt here is not to trace the gradual procedure from a version to the following one, but to 'interfere', or merge, all the versions in one hypothetical sequence. If a play has 'original' playwrights and a reviser—as is supposed to be the case of many Beaumont and Fletcher plays (*Love's Cure*, *Beggars' Bush* or *The Noble Gentleman*)—I will *assume* a synchronous work, and the 'author's intention' to be a *sum* of the various wills.

I will assume that Fletcher, having gathered source material, wrote a Plat. The second stage was to dramatize the Plat into the dialogic form. In these stages he had to make several choices, such as what is to be shown on the stage and what is to be presented offstage, how foil subplots are to be constructed, and to what extent the onstage action should support or subvert the fictional events. These choices point to the aim of the play, and could serve as helpful guidelines to a potential producer. One aspect that Chapter 5 is particularly dealing with concerns the relation between the stage and the fiction implicitly represented. The study of the dramatic structure and dialogic form eventually points to the features of a specifically Fletcherian style.