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PHILIP MASSINGER:

A STUDY OF HIS COMEDIES



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PREFACE

Despite the role which Philip Massinger (1583-1640) played as a leading dramatist for the Blackfriars Theatre from around 1625 to 1640, as a follower of William Shakespeare (1564-1616) and John Fletcher (1579-1625), Massinger's own work was not much investigated by critics. Cruickshank's Philip Massinger⁽¹⁾ was the only complete book in English on Massinger until 1957 when T.A. Dunn's Philip Massinger: The Man and the Playwright⁽²⁾ was published, the only lengthy valuable critical work, so far, on Massinger's dramatic art. R.H. Ball's The Amazing Career of Sir Giles Overreach⁽³⁾ deals with the stage history of Massinger's A New Way to Pay Old Debts (c. 1625) and the outstanding actors who played the role of Sir Giles Overreach. One recent book Massinger's Imagery⁽⁴⁾ by F.D. Evenhuis is a study of one aspect of Massinger's craft as a poet-dramatist. Most of the other studies, mainly essays, are on Massinger's role as collaborator in a number of contemporary plays, on his sources, and his literary and historical allusions.

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- (1) Alfred Cruickshank, Philip Massinger (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1920).
 - (2) T.A. Dunn, Philip Massinger: The Man and the Playwright (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd., 1957).
 - (3) R.H. Ball, The Amazing Career of Sir Giles Overreach (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939).
 - (4) F.D. Evenhuis, Massinger's Imagery (Salzburg: Salzburg University Press, 1973).

Sixteen of Massinger's plays survive as his unaided work of which the following ten were published during his life: The Duke of Milan (c. 1620-1622); The Maid of Honour (c. 1621); The Bondman (1623); The Renegado (1624); A New Way to Pay Old Debts (c. 1625); The Unnatural Combat (c. 1619-1626); The Roman Actor (1626); The Great Duke of Florence (1627); The Picture (1629); The Emperor of The East (1631). Four more were printed from manuscripts before the end of the seventeenth-century: The Bashful Lover, a tragi-comedy; The Guardian, a comedy; and A Very Woman, a tragi-comedy in Three New Plays (1655) and The City Madam, a comedy, written in 1632 and published in 1658. The two remaining plays are The Parliament of Love, a comedy, extant in a scribe's transcript (1624), and published for the first time in Gifford's edition in 1805⁽¹⁾, and Believe As You List, a tragedy, in the author's own hand, written in 1631, and published in the nineteenth-century⁽²⁾.

This study is, so far, the first critical work on Massinger as a comic playwright. Therefore, it eliminates his tragedies and tragi-comedies and concentrates on his five comedies The Parliament

(1) W. Gifford (ed.), The Plays of Philip Massinger (London: W. Bulmer & Co., 1805).

(2) Philip Edwards and Colin Gibson (eds.), The Plays and Poems of Philip Massinger, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), Vol. III, p. 300. (All references to Massinger's plays and poems, and their dates (since there are differences in dating the plays) in this study will be to this edition).

of Love (1624), A New Way to Pay Old Debts (1625), The Great Duke of Florence (1627), The City Madam (1632) and The Guardian (1633). The main concern of this thesis is to study Massinger's themes and to evaluate his dramatic qualities and stagecraft devices in these five comedies. It approaches the literary, economic, social and political background of his time not for itself or in general but in direct relation to the topics of his comedies in an attempt to understand what the text of each comedy actually says. Questions of the sources and dates of the comedies are not discussed since they have already been exhaustively covered by industrious research and because unoriginality of plot was not counted as a defect in the dramatist's age. The thematic and technical aspects instead are of more interest in this work.

This study consists of four chapters. The first chapter examines Massinger's social satire in A New Way to Pay Old Debts and The City Madam. The second chapter deals with court satire in The Parliament of Love, The Great Duke of Florence and The Guardian. The third chapter analyzes Massinger's method of characterization and the fourth and last chapter evaluates Massinger's technique in his comedies. The conclusion ties the different threads together giving an overall view of the conclusions reached in the body of the thesis. It is followed by an Appendix which gives a brief idea about the theatrical career of a dramatist whose biography is hardly known.

INTRODUCTION

Aristotle devoted most of his Poetics to tragedy; however, he defined comedy as:

... an imitation of men worse than the average, not indeed as regards any and every sort of vice, but only as regards the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity which produces no pain or harm to others (1)

Aristotle defines comedy as an art of imitation dealing with people who are worse than the ordinary level, and who are to be introduced in ridicule but without pain or harm. Plato and Cicero view the object of laughter as ridiculous because of his baseness or deformity.⁽²⁾ Horace in his Ars Poetica is more interested in the aims and functions of poetry:

Poets aim at giving either profit or delight, or at combining the giving of pleasure with some useful precepts for life. (3)

In his Apology for Poetry published (1595) Philip Sidney (1556-1586) considers these didactic precepts as very important:

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- (1) John Warrington (ed. & trans.), Aristotle's Poetics (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1969), pp. 10-11.
 - (2) Elder Olson, The Theory of Comedy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), p. 8.
 - (3) T.S. Dorsch (ed. & trans.), Classical Literary Criticism (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978), p. 95.

... Comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which he representeth in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be, so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one. (1)

The moral value of comedy is obvious, here, since the aim of drama is to represent comic characters in a ridiculous and scornful manner in order to make the audience despise them. The doctrine of "delighting and teaching" is echoed in Sidney's following words:

... since neither his description nor his end containeth any evil, the thing described cannot be evil; since his effects be so good as to teach goodness and to delight the learners (2)

Sidney believes that the comic dramatist must make his audience laugh at folly on the stage. In fact, they laugh, in his view, at their own follies and they cannot avoid this shameful laughter unless they get rid of their follies:

... who sportingly never leaveth until he make a man laugh at folly, and at length ashamed to laugh at himself, which he cannot avoid, without avoiding the folly (3)

(1) Philip Sidney, An Apology for Poetry, edited by Geoffery Shepherd (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd., 1967), p. 117.

(2) Ibid., p. 120.

(3) Ibid., p. 117.

By seeing the ugliness of folly and vice, the audience can realize the beauty of virtue:

... in the actions of our life who seeth
not the filthiness of evil wanteth a
great foil to perceive the beauty of
virtue. This doth the Comedy handle
so in our private and domestical matters (1)

In fact, Sidney handles the stage from a moralistic as well as aesthetic point of view. Shepherd points out that:

From the time of the publication by Thomas Zouch in 1808 of Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Sir Philip Sidney, it has been commonly supposed that the Apology was intended as answer to Stephen Gosson's School of Abuse, published late 1579, which was dedicated, apparently without permission, to Sidney. (2)

Whether this is the case or not, it is obvious from the Apology that Sidney is not defending the abuses which the Puritans were attacking. The Puritans proceeded to attack the stage as "devilish pastimes".⁽³⁾ Their attack on the theatre was part of their general campaign for moral discipline.⁽⁴⁾ The stage, to them, was representing

(1) Loc.cit.

(4) Ibid., p. 2.

(3) L.G. Salingar, "The Social Setting," The Age of Shakespeare, edited by Boris Ford, The Pelican Guide to English Literature, Vol. 2 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1980 edition), p. 35.

(4) Ibid., p. 41.

a culture which was pagan by origin.⁽¹⁾ They further objected to the deception of the stage:

The Puritans often objected to what they called the deception practised in the theatre; but instead of trying to prove this 'deception' harmless, such defenders as Sir Philip Sidney explained, quite rightly, that deception is not involved in aesthetic experience. In the famous passage in An Apology for Poetry (1595), he says that even children are not deceived at a play, how ridiculous then is it to suggest that grown men and women are imposed upon; it is not the business of the dramatic or of any other kind of poet 'to conjure you with circles about your imagination, to believe for true what he writes'. (2)

In his defence of poetry against the charge of being a worthless and time-wasting activity, Sidney stresses his aesthetic view of the stage. He protests against the violation of the classical laws of the stage and attacks the romantic attitude in the theatre which does not pay much attention to the probability of the action:

Now ye shall have three ladies walk
to gather flowers and then we must
believe the stage to be a garden. By
and by we hear news of shipwreck in
the same place, and then we are to
blame if we accept it not for a rock.

(1) Ibid., p. 33.

(2) Bertram Joseph, "The Elizabethan Stage and Acting," The Age of Shakespeare, edited by Boris Ford, p. 150.

Upon the back of that comes out a hideous monster with fire and smoke, and then the miserable beholders are bound to take it for a cave. While in the meantime two armies fly in, represented with four swords and bucklers, and then what hard heart will not receive it for a pitched field? (1)

Sidney asks the dramatist to apply reason to the dramatic presentation.⁽²⁾ To him the unities "are products of a sense of artistic economy and of concentration of effort."⁽³⁾

In fact, the dramatic views which Sidney submits in his Apology are not different from the literary judgements of that age such as, for example, those of Scaliger (1484-1558) and Sir Thomas Elyot (1499-1546);⁽⁴⁾ the purpose of comedy to Sir Thomas Elyot is to lay bare evil.⁽⁵⁾ Similarly, Thomas Heywood (1573-1641) in "An Apology For Actors" (1612) cites the educative influence of the stage on the unlearned and defends the player who acts the role of a "virgin".⁽⁶⁾ The Italian critic Trissino (1478-1550) in his Poetics (1529) concludes that:

(1) Philip Sidney, An Apology for Poetry, p. 134.

(2) Ibid., p. 83.

(3) Loc.cit.

(4) Loc.cit.

(5) James Sutherland, English Satire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 7.

(6) Thomas Heywood, "An Apology for Actors," The Seventeenth Century Stage, edited by Gerald Eades Bentley (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 12-13.

Comedy is an imitation of the wicked and the vicious, yet not in every extremity of the vices, but merely of that which is ugly, whence springs the ridiculous, which is an ugly defect without pain and without deaths. (1)

Recalling comedy from its romance in order to establish a realistic comedy is the purpose of Jonson's drama. In the Prologue to Every Man in His Humour (1597) he holds up the play as a perfect fusion of a classical form with contemporary subject-matter:

But deedes, and language, such as men doe use,
And persons, such as Comaemie would chuse,
When she would shew an Image of the times,
And sport with humane follies, not with crimes ? (2)

In this Prologue Jonson "is thoroughly opposed to romantic comedy and historical chronicles."⁽³⁾ He objects to them because they escape from reality and "because they lack classically precise form and indulge in cheap theatrical effects".⁽⁴⁾ He seeks to correct them by adopting the pattern of Latin Drama and "by making his comedies comment upon the errors of his age."⁽⁵⁾ In the Prologue to Volpone (1605) Jonson says:

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- (1) Allan Gilbert (ed. & trans.), Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden (New York: The American Book Company, 1940), p. 224.
(2) Ben Jonson, Every Man in His Humour in Ben Jonson, edited by C.H. Herford and Perry Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1925-1952), Vol. III, p. 303.
(3) A. Nicoll, British Drama (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1962), p. 100.
(4) and (5) Loc.cit.

And so presents quick comaedie, refined,
As best Criticks have designed;
The lawes of time, place, persons he observeth,
From no needfull rule he swerueth. (1)

In his induction to Every Man Out of His Humour (1599) Jonson reflects his dissatisfaction at the current practice of representing many widely separated localities in the same play.⁽²⁾

Comedy to Jonson is intellectual, not emotional. In his Discoveries (c. 1620-1635) he speaks about the intellectual side of man as nobler than the emotional one:

for Passions are spirituall Rebels, and
raise sedition against the understanding. (3)

His intellectual attitude is expressed also in the Induction to Bartholomew Fair (1614); he is against "those that beget Tales, Tempests, and such-like Drolleries, to mixe his head with other mens-heeles."⁽⁴⁾ Jonson is by his own assertion a moralist. The Discoveries gives evidence of a moralistic attitude:

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- (1) Ben Jonson, Volpone in Ben Jonson, edited by C.H. Herford and Percy Simpson, Vol. V, p. 24.
 - (2) Ben Jonson, Every Man Out of His Humour in Ben Jonson, edited by C.H. Herford and Percy Simpson, Vol. III, pp. 436-437.
 - (3) Ben Jonson, The Discoveries in Ben Jonson, edited by C.H. Herford and Percy Simpson, Vol. VIII, p. 564.
 - (4) Ben Jonson, Bartholomew Fair in Ben Jonson, edited by C.H. Herford and Percy Simpson, Vol. VI, p. 16.

... why doe Physicians cure with sharpe
medicines, or corrosives ? Is not the
same equally lawfull in the cure of
the minde, that is in the cure of the
body ? (1)

His moral attitude to comedy is urged over and over again; in
the doctrine echoed in the Prologue to The Silent Woman (1609)
he says:

The ends of all, who for the Scene doe write,
Are or should be, to profit, and delight. (2)

Jonson's moral bias is expressed in the Prologue to The Alchemist
(1610):

But, when the wholesome remedies are sweet,
And, in their working, gaine, and profit meet,
He hopes to find no spirit so much diseases'd,
But will, with such faire correctiues, be pleas'd. (3)

This is the purpose of a moralist and a satirist. Jonson's satiric
attitude is revealed in the Prologue to Volpone:

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- (1) Ben Jonson, The Discoveries in Ben Jonson, edited by C.H. Herford and Percy Simpson, Vol. VIII, p. 634.
 - (2) Ben Jonson, The Silent Woman in Ben Jonson, edited by C.H. Herford and Percy Simpson, Vol. V, p. 164.
 - (3) Ben Jonson, The Alchemist, Ibid., p. 294.