



This Rough Magic

A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal

Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature



Theatrical Politics and Political Theatricality in Massinger's *The Roman Actor*

Author(s): Denise A. Walen

Reviewed Work(s):

Source: *This Rough Magic*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (June, 2010), pp. 102-108.

Published by: www.thisroughmagic.org

Stable URL: <http://www.thisroughmagic.org/walen%20article.html>

"Theatrical Politics and Political Theatricality in Massinger's *The Roman Actor*"

by Denise A. Walen

Philip Massinger's *The Roman Actor* is a rich metadramatic text that challenges assumptions about the power of theater to effect change in society and questions the relationship between performance, politics, and reception. The King's Men first presented the play at the Blackfriar's in 1626, two years after the unpopular Charles I had ascended the English throne, and the text appeared in print in 1629, when his monarchy was already in crisis. Massinger's play rehearses social and political arguments in contemporary Stuart London from the relative safety of the Roman setting he employs. The play also eerily previews the civil unrest and regicide Massinger did not live to see but on some level predicted more than twenty years before Charles I was beheaded in front of the Banqueting House at Whitehall. This fertile text supplies material to discuss both the question of political authority and absolute rule, as well as the power, place, and purpose of theater in early modern England.

I work with this play in an undergraduate seminar titled "Shakespeare in Production" that I teach at Vassar College. The course emphasizes the conditions under

which writers created the plays and actors performed them. One of the course goals is to provide students with greater access to the plays by helping them understand the context in which the material was written and performed. In order to facilitate that goal, the course meets for three hours once a week and relies heavily on practical exercises as an experiential tool to critically analyze the texts as performance scripts and dramatic literature. Class sessions unfold like rehearsals in which the students actively participate.

The Roman Actor has proven very useful in experiments of rehearsal and the repertory system in the early modern English theater, which then give way to discussions about anti-theatrical prejudice and the defense of theater in seventeenth-century England. I chose *The Roman Actor* not only for the classical defense of theater it presents, but also because I was confident the students would not be familiar with the script. Therefore, they come to the text with little prior knowledge of it, as an early acting company might. After an introductory class, we begin reading the script aloud together at the end of several class sessions; those classes focus on the physical space of the theater, acting, and the audience. At the end of the fourth week, when we finish reading the script, I give students their sides for a few scenes in the play and ask them to prepare their roles for class the following week. The sides consist of their character lines preceded by several cue words and any stage directions in the original script (which are minimal). During the fifth week, we begin class by running through these

scenes in a rough rehearsal. Typically, we use 1.1 and Caesar's triumphal entry in 1.4. I also like to have a student serve as bookkeeper because some students struggle to remember their parts. Others, however, learn their lines brilliantly, and still others have proven excellent at extemporaneously recreating the meaning of their speeches even if they do not remember the exact words they are to speak. This exercise is a highlight of the course.

Besides preparing their roles for this class session, the students also read several chapters in Tiffany Stern's *Making Shakespeare; From Page to Stage*. After the class experiment, we discuss working with character parts. Our conversation includes the challenges they faced working with such a limited script and the aspects of production, such as blocking and address, which became especially difficult. We talk about the possibilities for movement and action, and theorize what kinds of conventions might have governed production. We discuss the way the meter supports memory. We talk about the benefits of working together as a company over a long period of time. We also discuss the benefits that accrue to working with sides, such as the attention they must pay to their own character lines and the focus they gain from listening intently for their cue.

Once we have finished our discussion, the class takes up the 1595-96 calendar year of performances at the Rose Theater found in Philip Henslowe's diary. After an

initial explanation of the calendar, pairs of students track an individual play. From this work, the students learn how quickly the repertory turned over and that plays rarely had more than a dozen performances scattered over a calendar year. The rehearsal experiment with *The Roman Actor* puts the repertory system in context and they begin to have great respect for early modern actors and the demands of the theater. This brings us back to Massinger's text and the arguments he presents about the stage.

The text is clearly metadramatic and comments on both the power of theater in society and the theatricality of political power.^[1] In the first scene of the play, the Roman actor of the title, Paris, is arrested on charges that his company of actors has libeled Caesar, ridiculed men and women of rank, and presented scandalous and seditious actions in performance. In class, we discuss not only Paris' conventionally Horatian defense of the theater, but the contradictory evidence Massinger presents in the three inset plays he stages in the text. Paris argues that plays deter illegal and immoral actions by portraying the consequences of such acts and inspire virtue by presenting heroic deeds. He asserts that plays never allow villains to escape unpunished, and explains that if a play stirs the guilty conscious of an audience member because the individual sees him or herself reflected in the moral of the plot, actors are not to blame. Rather, the state should condemn the guilty parties and leave the theater free from censorship.

What follows this passionate defense of the theater is surprisingly equivocal evidence suggesting that the theater in fact fails to teach moral lessons. In the first inset play, the miser Philargus sympathizes with his stage image and interprets the play as a justification of his own economic frugality. He is not persuaded that fiscal liberality is the healthier alternative. Next, the empress Domitia fails to distinguish fiction from reality when she assumes that Paris is a gifted lover after she watches him perform in a romance, Massinger's second inset play, and falls in love with him. All separation between fiction and reality is erased in the final inset play when the now jealous Domitian, refusing the "rebated" sword of the performers, stabs and kills Paris while acting with him in a scene from *The False Servant*. Even though Paris denied that the theater encourages illicit and decadent behavior the evidence of the play suggests it does just that. The theater seems, from Massinger's examples, indiscriminately interpretive, emotionally evocative, and sensational. However, the play represents Philargus, Domitia, and Caesar (Domitian) as obsessive, irrational, and degenerate characters that fail as spectators to understand the nature and purpose of theater. Therefore, the theater does not fail in its purpose. Rather, spectators fail in their responsibility.^[2] The play seems to argue that common Englishmen are able to distinguish the fictive nature of theater and benefit from its moral lessons. Further, civic and religious censors, who themselves seem to misunderstand the nature of theater, should stop blaming the stage for the compulsive behavior of a few individuals.

Besides discussing performance and reception, we also discuss the complex nature of theatrical patronage in early modern England. One of the difficulties of the text is that Paris not only relies on Domitian's patronage, he never questions his authority or criticizes his violent excess. In fact, of all the characters in the play Paris seems the most sincerely loyal of Caesar's subjects. Therefore, Paris is either politically naïve and it would be prudent to examine all his actions and motives for signs of immaturity, or he is complicit with Domitian's behavior and morally suspect. Either way, as the play's titular protagonist he is a problematic character. He is neither a clear Aristotelian tragic figure nor a kind of Jacobean anti-hero and his uncritical relation to Domitian raises troubling questions about the Stuart court's patronage of the English theater.

Working with a play like *The Roman Actor* allows students in my class to experiment with theories of rehearsal in the early modern theater and examine the challenges of the repertory system. The play is highly effective at prompting discussion of the nature and purpose of theater, the role of the audience, and theatrical censorship. With its complex layering and enigmatic title character the students have a great deal to discuss. In fact, the play is such a rich source of material on the Caroline theater that I often quickly cover the broader political issues in the play on my own.^[3] As drama majors, the students have little knowledge of the Stuart court and the concept of absolute sovereignty that would eventually lead Parliament to oppose the monarchy of

Charles I. Therefore, I typically explain the connection between the execution of Charles I and Domitian's assassination, which originates with dissatisfaction over his absolutist rule. The students, instead, focus on the theatrical metaphors and look at the way Massinger structured the play. They have their hands full with Massinger's deeply layered, densely metadramatic, text and I highly recommend the play for any class looking at the early modern English theater.

Endnotes

1. See Joanne Rochester, *Staging Spectatorship in the Plays of Philip Massinger*, England: Ashgate 2010, 15-52; and Bill Angus, "The Roman Actor, Metadrama, Authority, and the Audience," *SEL* 50.2, 2010: 445-64.
2. Martin White reads the play this way in *The Revels Plays* edition. See Martin White, ed., *The Roman Actor: A Tragedy*, by Philip Massinger, Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007, 22-46. For other discussions of theatrical imagery in the play, see also Richard A. Burt, "'Tis Writ by Me': Massinger's *The Roman Actor* and the Politics of Reception in the English Renaissance Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 40.3, 1988: 332-46; Andrew James Hartley, "Philip Massinger's *The Roman Actor* and the Semiotics of Censored Theater," *ELH* 68.2, 2001: 359-76; A. P. Hogan, "Imagery of Acting in *The Roman Actor*," *The Modern Language Review* 66.2, 1971: 273-81; and David A. Reinheimer, "The Roman Actor, Censorship, and Dramatic Autonomy," *SEL* 38.2, 1998: 317-332.
3. On the political issues in the play see Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983, 203-9; Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England*, Madison: The U of Wisconsin P, 1984, 87-91; Douglas Howard, "Massinger's Political Tragedies," in *Philip Massinger: A Critical Reassessment*, ed. Douglas Howard, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985, 117-37; and Martin Butler, "Romans in Britain: *The Roman Actor* and the Early Stuart Classical Play," in *Philip Massinger: A Critical Reassessment*, ed. Douglas Howard, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985, 139-70.