

Censorship and Representation in The Stuart Era: Three Roman Plays

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Ben Jonson's *Sejanus His Fall* (1603) and Philip Massinger's *The Roman Actor* (1626) and *Believe as You List* (1631), though separated by over twenty years of Stuart regulation of the theatre, are remarkable in that each provides political commentary on freedom of thought in Jacobean and Carolean England through a Roman narrative which explores the abuses of power or implicitly criticizes those who wield it. As a means of expression, the "Roman play" had seemed before *Sejanus* to be a safe vehicle for exploration of political themes. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* had successfully explored republican themes and was a great hit ever since its first performance in 1599, yet both Jonson and Massinger found themselves in trouble for veiled commentary in their work, Jonson for *Sejanus* and Massinger in the demand that he rewrite certain passages in *Believe as You List* (1631). Finally, *The Roman Actor*, while not an object of censorship, addresses its use in a way that is both direct and ambiguous, as I shall show.

These plays provide, then, a unique opportunity to explore the artists' political statements and their relationship to the monarchy under which they lived, though any such thesis is complicated by three major problems. First, as Matthew Wikander warns, one should not expect "an elaborately encoded political allegory," but rather a "sequence of flashes of recognition" which in the context of a story removed from current events may indeed comment on the present (346); clearly wrought political allegory could too easily make one a target for royal displeasure. Second, such explorations are complicated by the fact that the exact circumstances and process of charges and defense in Jonson's case cannot be ascertained because "Privy Council records for this year (1604) are not

extant" (Wikander 346). The complaint against *Believe As You List* is also obscure. The censor's cryptic note claims only that the play contained "dangerous matter, as the deposition of Sebastian king of Portugal, by Philip . . . ther being a peace sworn twixte the kings of England and Spayne" (Herbert, quoted in Edwards and Gibson 293). Thus, one must develop any political thesis tenuously, with rigorous attention to current events and the likely parallels in each play. Third, both Jonson and Massinger distance themselves from events on which they may comment by carefully following their sources, enabling them to "foreswear the application" with which they might be charged. Given these caveats, I intend to explore the three plays as political vehicles in the context of the political machinations surrounding the issue of freedom of thought in Stuart England. First, however, it is necessary to review how that context developed and what was at stake, recalling the identities of major players and factions in order to clarify how political thought might be safely articulated and to understand the rationale behind the monarch's restrictions.

Censorship in the "Totalizing Society"

Stephen Greenblatt has characterized Elizabethan and Jacobean England as a "totalizing society" which "generates vivid dreams of access to the linked powers" while at the same time finding means to contain such access to or subversion of power (2). That access to power is evident in the fact that commoners like Shakespeare and Jonson felt sufficiently empowered to explore the machinations, uses and abuses of political power in their plays, yet the government also limited those explorations through a variety of stratagems. A clear example of this thesis is to be found in the kinds of censorship prac-

ticed by the crown, which allowed political discussion to enter the drama and poetry of the period only under certain conditions.

For example, one might glorify the monarch's ancestors, as in Shakespeare's various Henry plays or in *Macbeth*, but even in those cases, one had to be careful not to mock Scots in the Jacobean period, or infuriate the descendants of a particular house or the ambassadors of a foreign nation. Jonson's *Eastward Ho!* landed him in jail because of its derogatory references to Scots (3.3.40-47; Drabble 304), while Shakespeare was forced to change the name of his fat and scurrilous knight from Oldcastle to Falstaff in *I Henry IV* because Lord Cobham protested the desecration of his ancestor's memory as a Puritan martyr (Boyce 465). Middleton's *A Game of Chess* was suppressed because it offended the Spanish ambassador (Drabble 1106). In 1597, one year before Shakespeare's run-in with the authorities, Thomas Nashe found himself in even more serious trouble with *The Isle of Dogs*, which was declared seditious and suppressed. The theatres were closed for months, and the actors—Ben Jonson, Robert Shaw and Gabriel Spencer—were jailed. Nashe escaped by fleeing from London, and when he returned in 1599, he found "a blanket condemnation of his works by the government" (Boyce 456). The play has not survived.

Poets and playwrights were thus confronted with a multifaceted problem in the representation of contemporary life and politics: writings could be declared seditious if they leaned in any way toward Catholicism, and earned suspicion if they satirized Puritans, nobles, or the crown itself in a less than oblique manner. They could explore the vices of power by removing the scene to classical Rome or to Machiavellian Italy, but

even in those settings any allegorical similarity to current events could, as Jonson learned with *Sejanus His Fall*, lead to an appearance before the Privy Council. The rationale for the "Roman play" was to adapt the method of allegory—the "dark conceit" practiced by Spenser in *The Fairie Queene*; as noted above, one constructs a story without following the medieval practice exactly, allowing *some* of the elements to reflect on current conditions in a different context:

the secret of the game was to plant a dart on the target, and then escape punishment by 'foreswearing the application': that is, protesting that the allusion was either misunderstood or misapplied. The perpetrator could also escape by a public disavowal beforehand that the political or personal allusion had no bearing on current politics or living persons.

(Black 295)

The problem of public discourse is further complicated by the fact that the English monarchy was beset with enemies both within and without. When Henry VIII divorced Catherine of Aragon for Ann Boleyn and set himself up as head of the English church, England became the first protestant nation of Europe while earning the enmity not only of the Church, but of monarchs across the continent. France had been England's traditional enemy in any case, but the combination of economic competition and Catholicism—as well as Henry's rejection of Catherine—made Spain a dangerous and formidable enemy at least until 1588, the year of the Armada. Because Catholic propaganda intended to stir revolt against the king, Henry had issued proclamations "against heretical and seditious books" as early as 1529, and in 1538 all books published in the kingdom

had to be licensed by the privy council "or other royal nominees" (Drabble 1101). The process of directly controlling publication and of banning seditious—popish—books continued throughout the reign of Elizabeth with the Injunctions of 1559, which reaffirmed and extended the powers of the privy council and certain "dignitaries of the Church" to control publication. A Star Chamber ordinance further restricted printing presses to London, with a provision for "one in each of the university towns of Oxford and Cambridge" in 1564 (Drabble 1101).

Elizabeth also had to beware of enemies within. Ambitious lords such as Raleigh and Essex populated her court, and factions such as the Puritans had inveigled power and used it to suppress those they considered their enemies, especially the playwrights, who had mocked them mercilessly. The problem of the court favorite and his influence erupted in Essex's rebellion of 1601, in which the favored lord attempted to take the crown from Elizabeth. On the night before the rebellion, friends of Essex sponsored a performance of *Richard II*—in which the king resigns his crown to Henry Bollingbroke—as a means of rallying Londoners to his cause. As propaganda, the play did not raise the hopes of the city, whose denizens stayed indoors as Elizabeth's men quashed and rounded up Essex and his adherents. Later, the Queen claimed "that she herself was Richard," and the early printed versions of the play notably lacked the deposition scene (Baker 803-04).

When James ascended to the monarchy in 1603, he took the Lord Chamberlain's Men into his personal household, changing the company's name to The King's Men, a move which not only brought increased funds and opportunities for performance, but which also brought the players directly under his control (Heineman 36-37). James had

betrayed an interest in controlling how the court and history should be represented as early as 1596, when he expressed "great offence" at Edward Spenser for his portrayal of James's mother, Mary, as Duessa in *The Fairie Queene*, demanding that Spenser "for his faulte, may be dewly tryed and punished" (Bowes, quoted in Goldberg 1). James's own poetry had attempted "to impose the royal view and recast the world in the shape of the king's desires" (Goldberg 22), and after assuming the English throne, he would not only oversee The King's Men, but also increased the powers of the Master of Revels, giving him charge of licensing the printing of plays in addition to his earlier responsibility for their performance (Drabble 1106). Jonson's *Sejanus* was the first play to test the new court's tolerance of freedom of thought, and in doing so explored themes that were politically sensitive and potentially embarrassing to many who had power to harass the poet whose political agenda did not coincide with their own. Such guilty creatures have rarely heeded the messages of the play, concentrating instead on proclaiming their malefactions by attempting to silence those who expose similar abuses of power in a Roman context. Jonson's brush with the Privy Council illustrates the point, though he was clever enough to be able to "foreswear the application," probably through an appeal to his fidelity to Tacitus and his other classical sources.

Sejanus

The conditions surrounding the performance and publication of Jonson's *Sejanus* place it in an unusual niche in history. Wikander and Barish both argue that the play obliquely explores the Essex rebellion (Wikander 356; Barish 15-16), a claim which would explain Jonson's appearance before the Privy Council in that if *Sejanus* is Essex,

"the offence would have been to imply that Elizabeth had been a Tiberius" (Patterson 50). If this were the case, Cecil, Howard, and Coke would have recognized their analogues in the unprincipalled characters of Macro, Varro, and Afer; thus, Jonson would not only have been wryly glancing at a recent calamity in English politics, but would have been expressing trenchant public criticism of those already firmly established as power brokers in the new Jacobean hierarchy.

Wikander does not follow this tack, however, instead citing four major points of correspondence to justify his claim that Sejanus is an Essex figure. First, he cites Sabinus's speech describing "the trick in state, which jealous princes never fail to use" to keep an ambitious favorite from the throne: "to shift them forth into another air" (I.85-89). This is seen as analogous to Elizabeth's sending of Essex to Ireland. Second, Varro's accusation that Silius drew out the war in Gallia by "dissembling long that Sacrovir to be an enemy only to make thy entertainment more" (3. 184-86) is seen as a glance at Essex's dalliance in Ireland and his eventual connivance with Tyrone in a treaty expressly against the orders of Elizabeth. The problem with these references, of course, is that Essex cannot simultaneously be Sejanus and Silius. Wikander also cites Essex's "excessive promotions and distribution of knighthoods" and his "reputation for boasting" as characteristic of Sejanus (353). Finally, he notes a parallel in Dr. John Hayward's *History of Henry IV*, which was dedicated to Essex and later suppressed and burned as treasonable. Wikander claims that just as "imprisonment without decision was Hayward's fate," so too "decision on Jonson's Cordus is postponed until next sitting" (3.464; Wikander 354).

The first of these four points of correspondence is perhaps the strongest, yet even this does not present enough evidence to justify even an oblique identification of Essex with Sejanus, though the overall premise of the play could be said to reify the kind of favorite Essex became, as well as the dangers he represented. If Cecil and Howard saw themselves in the characters of Macro and Varro, Jonson could plead fidelity to his Roman sources—and indeed, the 1605 first quarto of the play was unusually buttressed with footnotes and references and the enigmatic claim that the work of the "second hand"—probably Chapman—was eliminated from the printed version. Jonson might also be able to plead that the character type of the overreaching favorite was a well-established motif in Elizabethan drama long before Essex, perhaps citing figures like Mortimer in *Edward II* to illustrate his point. The playwright could argue that his play generally examined the dangers to civil order represented by favoritism, rather than aiming at a pointed topical critique.

Philip J. Ayers, on the other hand, believes that the play had little to do with the Essex rebellion, "which was not a burning issue when the play was produced" (17). Ayers claims instead that *Sejanus* is a comment on the trial of Sir Walter Raleigh (18-22), which was the "great sensation of late 1603" (18). The play thus would have placed Jonson in trouble with Henry Howard not only for "popperie and treason" and as a result of "brauling on a St. Georges day one of his attenders" (Drummond 141), but because Howard was one of those most interested in bringing Raleigh down. Ayers points out that in both the trials of Silius and Raleigh, a great military commander is destroyed on trumped-up charges by a court favorite. Further, just as Silius eloquently defended himself against

the charges of Afer and Varro, so Raleigh calmly refuted the "brutal invectives of Coke" (Ayers 20), the prosecutor who served as the tool of Cecil and Howard. After noting several non-correspondences between the two trials, Ayers argues that the substance of the arguments in each court is similar--the lack of "tangible proof of treason, the evidence . . . [which was little more than] hearsay" (20), both Raleigh's and Silius's demand that the court follow the proper procedures of law, the fact that both were charged with impiety, and that both cited their military service as proof of their loyalty:

Silius's citing of his many military services to his Prince and country (III. 253-65) could, with a few changes of proper names, be Raleigh's, and they remind one of Raleigh's comments, during his trial, on how peculiar it is that he, who had done so much to thwart Spain over the years, should now be seen as Spain's agent. (Ayers 21)

These parallels are enticing, and made even more so by the fact that the defense of Silius "owes nothing to Tacitus" (Ayers 20), whose account of the trial is summary, without speeches other than Tiberius's argument for denying Silius's request that the trial be postponed until after the consulship of Varro expired (Tacitus IV. 18-19). The connections between Raleigh and Jonson are even more enticing; the fact that Raleigh was among the poets who occasionally met at the Mermaid Tavern argues that he may have known Jonson during the reign of Elizabeth, though the evidence is at best sketchy (Winton 148). Their friendship is more emphatically provable in the years following Raleigh's trial and Jonson's appearance before the council for *Sejanus*. Jonson took Raleigh's son Wat to Europe in 1613, which occasioned the famous story of Wat's getting Jonson drunk and

parading him through the streets of Paris in a wheelbarrow while claiming to passersby that his tutor was "a more lively image of the crucifix than any they had" (Winton 142). In 1614, Jonson contributed "The Mind of the Frontispiece to a Booke" to Raleigh's *History of the World* (Winton 289). This commendatory poem celebrates the vindication of the truth found in "grave historie" which assures the good that they will not be defrauded and "the Great" that "their wayes are understood, and the reward, and punishment assur'd," lines that perhaps refer obliquely to Raleigh's long and unjust imprisonment (lines 5-9).

Despite these connections, Ayers's claim that the trial of Silius in *Sejanus* refers to Raleigh's trial is complicated by the fact that Jonson had been working on the play long before the arrest of Raleigh in July of 1603 and that its earliest performance date would have been in the Christmas season of 1603 (Ayers 9). This would have given Jonson barely a month to adapt the trial of Silius to the circumstances of Raleigh's trial, which occurred on November 17. This not-impossible task is perhaps mitigated by the fact that the the entire premise of the play and the situation leading to the trial—the rise of a court favorite—could be observed much earlier in the connection between Raleigh, Howard, Essex and Cecil, and the circumstances of James's accession, which shed some light on the politics Jonson was either mirroring obliquely, or of which he was the circumstantial victim—if one is to believe the disclaimer in Jonson's preface to the readers or the justification of the play as merely representing Roman history.

In Elizabeth's waning years, Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, had been Elizabeth's favorite—the hero of Cadiz, later sent to Ireland because he had become too familiar with

the queen. While in Ireland, he had, as noted earlier, concluded a truce with Tyrone against the Queen's order, hurried back to England, also against Elizabeth's order, and burst into her bedroom with his news. He was later put under house arrest and during this period became "the focus of all the discontents of the realm" (Winton 221). Frustrated, Essex wrote to James VI of Scotland, advising him of a plot to put the Spanish infanta on the throne and implicating Cecil and Raleigh, the latter because of his "power and influence in the West Country, and his position as Governor of Jersey" (Winton 221). These were James's first glimpses of Raleigh as a potential trouble-maker. For his part, Raleigh had long seen the danger in Essex's ambition. As Captain of the Queen's Guard, he had warned Robert Cecil, then Lord Admiral, that Essex was "the canker of her estate and sauftye. Princes ar lost by securetye; and preseved by prevention. I have seen the last of her good dayes, and all ours, after his libertye" (Raleigh, quoted in Winton 220-21).

After Essex's death, Henry Howard took up the role of writing to James: "following Essex's example, he tried to poison James's mind against his personal enemies, chief among whom were Henry Brooke, eighth lord Cobham, and Sir Walter Raleigh" (D.N.B., quoted in Ayers 18), citing Raleigh's "soft voice of Jacob in courtly hypocrisy" and the fact that he "denies the Trinity" (Howard, quoted in Winton 238). Cecil had also played a role in defaming Raleigh to James, and there Howard appears as intermediary between Cecil and James before the latter assumed the throne of England. Elizabeth died on the 24th of March, 1603; James proceeded southward to take the throne, retained Cecil as principal secretary, elevated the Howard family (Riggs 105-06) and dismissed Raleigh as Captain of the Guard. By July 12-16, Raleigh was arrested, supposedly for his connec-

tions to the "Bye Plot" and the "Main Plot" against the new King. The Bye Plot, later called the "Priests' Treason" by Coke, involved forcing the King to "adopt religious policies more favorable to Catholics," while the Main Plot—the "Spanish Treason"—would send Raleigh's friend Lord Cobham to Spain, where he was to seek loans to finance sedition, later sending a Spanish army to England, killing "the fox and his cubs" and placing Lady Arabella Stuart on the throne (Winton 244).

When the matter came to trial on November 17, both Henry Howard and Thomas Howard were among the judges who sentenced Raleigh to death, a judgment later commuted to imprisonment by James. The only evidence that Sir Edward Coke, the prosecutor, could produce was Raleigh's having eaten dinner with Cobham and Cobham's later turning against Raleigh, accusing him of being the "chief instigator of the intrigue" (Winton 245). The claim that Raleigh was connected to such plots hearkens back to Essex's charges of his wanting to bring a Spanish army to England, but more importantly, is mirrored in the rise of Henry Howard and his family under James—the same Howard who brought Jonson before the Privy Council for "popperie and treason." If the trial of Silius could be shown to support Raleigh and condemn Howard or Cecil, it would also seemingly support the Catholic plots of which Howard and the other judges found Raleigh guilty, as well as the identification of James with the tyrannical Tiberius.

Jonson, of course, was freed of the charges Howard brought against him, but since no records exist to clarify their exact nature, we cannot do more than infer that he was glancing at such topical matters as the Essex rebellion or the Raleigh trial. Even if he began work on *Sejanus* long before Raleigh's arrest and trial, he would have had plenty of

time to construct the play as an exploration of the Machiavellian overreacher modelled on the the likes of the Earl of Essex, perhaps developing the trial of Silius as an echo of the Raleigh trial in the play's last month of composition. His purpose would have been to stir the new king to thought as to how courts and kingdoms are corrupted through the rise of a favorite and the use of spies to undermine the justice of royal decision-making. Ultimately, *Sejanus* transcends its topical connections, important as they may be. The play is a device to dramatize "the decline of Roman liberty," warning the English "against allowing it to happen to them" (Barish 19) while simultaneously glancing obliquely at the "desperate condition of the society James would inherit" (Wikander 357).

The Roman Actor and Believe as You List

More than twenty years after *Sejanus*, Philip Massinger's famous defense of the stage and critique of "enemies, and great ones too" in *The Roman Actor* raises questions about the nature of later Jacobean and Carolean politics and censorship, and about the kinds of the political representation allowed in the theatre during this period. Two issues predominate in the politics of James's last and Charles's first years as king. These are the question surrounding England's responsibilities to her protestant allies in the Thirty Years' War on the continent—particularly Frederick V, Elector Palatine and protestant claimant to the throne of Bavaria—and the problem of the rising power of a Puritan Parliament whose desire to control the social life of England was insatiable. Connected to both issues is the royal demand to limit debate over England's position regarding the continental war and the Puritans' wish to curb what they saw as licentious speech and behavior associated with the theatre. These issues are complicated by the claims and

counter-claims scholars have made regarding Massinger's more openly political plays, especially *The Bondman*, *The Maid of Honour*, and *Believe as You List*, both in determining the extent and nature of the political commentary they contain, and in how to interpret such comments.

In his discussion of political references in Massinger's plays, Allen Gross points out that earlier discussions of the subject had displayed a "decline in reasonableness and balanced judgement" in the topical parallels developed by S. R. Gardiner and others (282). The satirical portrait of Buckingham, the King's favorite, which Bryne and Spencer found in *The Bondman*, for example, is taken to task because "in 1623, when *the Bondman* was written, there was no evidence" of Buckingham's incompetence as an admiral" (283). His claim does not necessarily confute the earlier claims, but does highlight two problems associated with such scholarship. First, as we have seen with Jonson, it was important during this entire period that a play *not* develop exact parallels with any contemporary situation or with those in power. If king, court, or censors could detect such parallels, the playwright was immediately viewed with suspicion, hailed before a Privy Council, or, as in the case of Middleton, jailed. Such references thus *could not* be exact because of the nature of the relationship between court and poet. The second problem grows from the first: because the references could not be exact, scholars are at a loss to develop convincing arguments as to the identity of characters and situations, having to endlessly qualify their arguments from fairly slender evidence. In the case of *The Bondman*, Massinger may have developed the character of Admiral Gisco from Buckingham's

court demeanor and reputation, extending the character beyond the confines of the initial portrait for the demands the plot would make of the character:

Giscos their Admirall,
And tis our happinesse: a rawe young fellow,
One never traird in Armes, but rather fashiond
To tilt with Ladyes lips, then cracke a Launce,
Ravish a Feather from a Mistrisse Fanne
And weare it as a Favour; a steele Helmet
Made horrid with a glorious Plume, will cracke
His womans necke.

(1.1.49-56)

That Buckingham had not displayed his incompetence in battle need not preclude him being the source of the portrait; he was Lord Admiral when the play was produced and did have this sort of reputation despite the fact that he had not endured the proofs of battle at this point.

Gross further asserts that because there were no newspapers in this period, Massinger's knowledge of "political maneuvering at court, and about the motives and characters of Charles, his queen, and his Lord High Treasurer, and the Spanish ambassador" would have been insufficient to enable him to glance at Carolean politics in *Believe as You List* (283). This claim ignores the fact that the events the play supposedly glances at—the death in battle of Don Sebastian, King of Portugal, and the subsequent appearance of several pretenders claiming to be him, and the fall of Frederick V, elector Palatine, James's son-in-law, and protestant claimant to the throne of Bohemia—occurred years before the production of *Believe as You List*—in 1578 and in 1620 respectively. The first of these events had already been celebrated in two ballads, "Strange newes of the Retourne of Don Sebastian Kinge of Portugall" (1599) and "The Wonder of the world

of Don Sebastian the King of Portugall that lost him selfe in the battell of Affrick" (1601), and in Chettel and Dekker's play, *King Sebastian of Portugal* (1601), now lost (Edwards and Gibson 294-95). The more immediate and obvious reference to the fall of Frederick V was an event still unfolding in 1631, but it was clear by that point that England, though sympathetic to Frederick's plight, was not about to engage in a war to save him from the Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand II, and from his Spanish Habsburg allies. Massinger thus need not have been a court insider to gather enough information for the basis of a play that in any case only roughly parallels the situation of Frederick or that of Don Sebastian, and provides, as Gross himself later admits, "a general parallel between Antiochus and the historical Frederick" and "a dignified plea for international justice in the case of Frederick" (288).

Gross also suggests that commentators such as Gardiner, Bryne, Stochholm and Spencer do not pay sufficient attention to the facts of censorship in the last years of James and in the reign of Charles, and as such ignore the conditions under which Massinger worked, citing James's 1620 proclamation prohibiting "lavish Discourse and bould Censure in Matters of State," the 1623 and 1624 prohibitions against seditious books touching either on the state or on religion, and Charles's 1627 restriction and 1632 prohibition against "the printing of foreign news" (284). He also points out the imprisonment of Thomas Middleton for his scandalous 1624 play, *A Game at Chess*, as further proof that playwrights needed to exercise even greater care in representation that might be seen as glancing at contemporary politics. The fact that many of Massinger's plays embody some general reference to contemporary politics and that Massinger was only officially cen-

sored twice—for *Believe as You List* and *The King and the Subject*—argues that he had solved the problem of political representation not by taking sides, but by dramatizing "ambivalence and inconsistency" in his plays in a manner similar to that of the "Shakespearean dialectic" of the *Henry* plays (Patterson 82). Patterson focuses on *The Maid of Honour* claiming that this play explores both pacificism and activism "to show both how they inevitably conflict" and how "they may . . . be held trivially or inconsistently," resolving these conflicts with Camiola's "retreat into the life of contemplation" (982). Positions on the continuing Thirty Years War are thus explored and seemingly resolved without developing "a consistent allegory of international relations," at the same time presenting "a thoughtful but not detached analysis of a national problem, the location and definition of honor in the modern world" (Patterson 81-82).

The motif of ambivalent representation is explored more thoroughly in Stephen Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations*, which asserts that the poet could, in such an atmosphere of censorship and repression, represent positions alien to the crown if these positions would inevitably be subverted or contained in the plays. Heineman notes such a containment in *The Bondman*, where Marullo, leader of a slave rebellion, heroically asserts that "equal nature fashioned us all in one mould" and that only "odds of strength" gives tyrants their sway over the mass of men (2.3.32-34), later revealing that he is in fact a nobleman in disguise (which accounts for his nobility of purpose) while the actual slaves "are seeking the chance only to loot and rape and then become fat exploiting parasites themselves." Their dignity is subverted, and they are easily put down when the army returns. The play thus explores "a burning anger against nobility and gentry, cou-

pled with an acute sense that the multitude must and should be kept down" (Heineman 217).

Believe as You List presents a different kind of containment in that Massinger was forced in his revision—the version that we have today—to swerve away from the subject of Don Sebastian, a subject that too closely paralleled the troubles of Frederick, a fact noted in Herbert's refusal to license the play and in the disclaimer at the heart of the play's own prologue:

If you find what's Roman here,
Grecian or Asiatic, draw too near
A late and sad example, 'tis confessed
He's but an English scholar at his best,
A stranger to cosmography, and may err
in the countries' names, the shape and character
Of the persons he presents.

Heineman believes that the rewriting of the Don Sebastian story as that of Antiochus of Syria—derived from Raleigh's *History of the World*, Plutarch's life of Flaminius and Livy's story of Antiochus's relations with Prusias—removed the subject sufficiently far from contemporary reference, and thus Herbert could approve the second version in 1631 (Heineman 218-19; Edwards and Gibson 296-97). The potential critique of James in the waffling of the Carthaginians and Bithynians is intact, yet is apparently sufficiently contained in this case by its removal to Rome and by the already noted fact that the parallels the play draws to current events and persons are inexact.

While *Believe as You List*, *The Bondman*, and *The Maid of Honour* indirectly comment on limitations on the freedom of speech through Roman analogue or through the representation and containment of alien positions, *The Roman Actor* seemingly

approaches the subject of the value of free expression more directly in its defense of the stage, a subject that at once comments on puritan and parliamentary demands for containment of the theatre and presents what appears to be the last of a long series of defenses of poetry and self-expression that begins with Sidney's *Defense of Poetry*, itself a response to Stephen Gosson's characterization of poetry as a *School of Abuse*. The speech would seem to side with the poets against their puritanical detractors, reviving Sidney's claim that poetry instructs by showing evil men their "own actions contemptibly set forth" (284) while at the same time presenting "the lofty image of such worthies [which] most inflameth the mind with desire to be worthy" (286).

William Lee Sandidge claims that the defense of the stage is a response to increasing pressures to curb the influence of the playwrights. Early in his reign, James had forbidden "bear-baiting and stage-playing on the Sabbath" in response to increasing demands for containing the influence of the stage (17), though Puritan pressures continued, no doubt enhanced by the satirical portraits poets had made of them, as in Jonson's devastating indictment of their hypocrisy in the character of Zeal-of-the-Land Busy. Similarly, Massinger's *Paris* points out that Aretinus, like those Puritans mocked by Jonson and others, wanted to "silence us forever" because he was "galled in our last comedy" (1.1.37-38). In 1612, Thomas Heywood published an "Apology for Actors" restating Sidney's claims, and was answered three years later by the anonymous "A Refutation of the Apology for Actors," a treatise that expounded on "their 'Heathenish and Diabolicall institution,' their 'ancient and modern indignity,' and 'the wonderful abuse of their impious quality'" (Sandidge 18). Other attacks followed, and with the commencement of the

Thirty Years' War in 1618, both the crown and Puritan anxiety over the influence of Catholicism and the rise of "immorality" increased steadily. The most important attack growing from this anxiety was "A Short Treatise against Stage-Playes," which on May 23, 1625 opened with a prelude addressed to Parliament and asked that the government "restreyne them for ever hereafter" (Sandidge 18). On June 8, Parliament passed its own act eliminating Sunday performances and in doing so usurped what had been a royal prerogative. Sandidge sees this as evidence that would stir Massinger to write Paris's defense and the critique of Parliament seen in analogue as the Roman Senate, lamenting that

That reverend place, in which the affairs of Kings
 And provinces were determin'd, . . . [should] descend
 To the censure of a bitter word, or jest,
 Dropped from a poet's pen!

(1.1.62-65)

Massinger's defense of his profession is complicated when Paris's speech is placed in the context of the three plays within the play, each of which strains against the idea that spectators are raised by the examples of great men and, seeing the ends of those engaged in "Lydian panderism, Corinthian poisons, Persian flatteries, . . . go home changed men" (102-06). Despite the claim of efficacy in persuading its audience to virtue, the "Curse of Avarice" fails to persuade Philargus to give up miserliness, while the play of Iphis and Anaxarete stirs Domitia to a public admission of her lust for Paris, and "The False Servant" gives Domitian a suitable forum for the public execution of Paris himself. Doris Adler sees the strain between the actor's defense and the actual ends for which the drama is used as "both the function of drama and the timeless failure of drama to achieve

this function," pointing out that Massinger's play explores how heedless rulers and courts are impressed by spectacle without hearing the messages or being moved to change their ways (68). The play thus encourages re-reading both the court and the stage for flaws that plague society. Rebecca Bushnell is less sanguine, seeing an indictment in the play: "*The Roman Actor's* theatre thrives on the tyrant's riches and his passions, while it provides him with violent pleasures"; the play is for her an exploration of "the ways in which the theatre itself creates and serves the tyrant" (173)—and thus an indictment of his own profession. Whether one sees *The Roman Actor* as a challenge to be thoughtful about the actions of monarchs and the uses to which theatre is put or as an indictment of both monarchs and the stage, the play does seem to involve a reassessment of purpose at a time when the King's position on freedom of expression had hardened (viz. the 1620, 1623 and 1623 proclamations; see page 17) and Parliamentary influence was growing. Of the plays glanced at in this paper, then, *The Roman Actor* seems the most ambivalent in its position, at once affirming an old position by which poets had long defended themselves and re-reading that position in the light of actual usage in a tyrannical court. Such distortions in themselves point to the difficulty of standing upright in the face of a heavy wind.

Conclusion

Each of the plays I have examined displays the kinds of accommodation poets had to make in the context of the "totalizing society" of Stuart England. Jonson's *Sejanus* shows that disguising one's references in a Roman context was no guarantee of acceptance, though he was able to "foreswear the application," probably through fidelity to his sources and in such claims as that plays generally instruct rather than specifically accuse,

as well as in the disclaimers heading up the quarto edition of the play. Twenty-seven years later, Philip Massinger's *Believe as You List* also ran afoul of the censor because its subject seemed to glance too closely at "dangerous matter, as the deposing of Sebastian king of Portugal, by Philip . . . ther being a peace sworn twixte the kings of England and Spayne" (Herbert, quoted in Edwards and Gibson 293). Further, the subject apparently was seen as glancing too closely at the fate of Frederick V and the inaction of the Stuarts. In this case, the rewriting of the play to conform to the story of Antiochus of Syria and his troubles with Flaminius and Prusias, among others, seemingly gave *Believe as You List* a second life despite the fact that its admittedly inexact parallels generally maintain the critique of Stuart inaction and a plea for justice in the case of Frederick. Finally, *The Roman Actor*, while seeming to argue against the Puritan Parliament's increasing hegemony over affairs affecting the stage, is actually a re-reading of both the cruelties of imperial tyranny and the uses to which the stage is put in such a society. The play swerves away from its apparent political target with an ambiguity that at once complicates its message and blunts any single-minded interpretation of it.

As a public institution with a great deal of influence in the forming of civic attitudes in a "totalizing society," the stage was thus at once the forum for the display of attitudes alien to those in power as well as the means for their containment. Those with specific agendas, such as Jonson, found it necessary to disguise their messages in a Roman context, destroying clearly wrought political allegory by presenting inexact parallels and bolstering their claims of innocence with prologues forswearing any specific political application and with proof of fidelity to the old stories they had used to mask their

agendas. Massinger would explore this method of delivery in some of his plays, often complicating his subjects by a process of exposure and containment, as in Marullo's appeal to the equality of all men, or by a deliberate ambivalence that forces all parties to reassess their positions, as in *The Roman Actor*. In the end, it is important to recall that the general instruction of such masked drama ultimately leaves us with questions not only about the represented society, but about the nature of justice and the extent to which either the world of Stuart England or the world we ourselves inhabit may measure up to that ideal.

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