

PHILIP J. FINKELPEARL

# Court and Country Politics in the Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher



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in the Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher**

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*Philip J. Finkelpearl*

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## To Some Old Friends

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*In appreciation of a lifetime  
of support and inspiration:*

*KITTY*

*and*

*Anne and Dave*

*Bob*

*Sophie and Jack*

*Denise and Bob*

*Susan and Stephen*



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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THIS BOOK began as an ambitious effort to say everything about the vast canon of work ascribed to the seventeenth-century English collaborative playwrights Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher. Eventually I discovered that this would have been a formidable task even with the assistance of as many additional collaborators as the playwrights themselves had. Thus I have restricted my discussion to the areas in which I differ significantly from the *consensus gentium*, primarily, but not exclusively, regarding the politics of the plays. I avoid many matters (among them the insoluble problem of exactly who wrote what) and do not even mention plays unrelated to my concerns. However, I hope that through my narrow window I have shown something of the importance and fascination of this remarkably neglected subject.

Some parts of this book first appeared as articles, often in very different forms: "'Wit' in Francis Beaumont's Poems," *Modern Language Quarterly* 28 (1967): 33–44; "Beaumont, Fletcher, and 'Beaumont and Fletcher': Some Distinctions," *English Literary Renaissance* 1 (1971): 144–64; "The Date of Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Noble Gentleman*," *Notes and Queries* 24 (1977): 137–40; "The Role of the Court in the Development of Jacobean Drama," *Criticism* 24 (1982): 138–58; and "'The Comedians' Liberty': Censorship of the Jacobean Stage Reconsidered," *English Literary Renaissance* 16 (1986): 123–38.

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# Court and Country Politics in the Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher

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## INTRODUCTION

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Two happy wits, late brightly shone  
The true sonnes of Hyperion,  
Fletcher and Beaumont, who so wrot,  
Johnsons Fame was soon forgot,  
Shakespeare no glory was alow'd,  
His sun quite shrunk beneath a Cloud.  
—Samuel Sheppard (1651)

A STUDY of the writing done together and separately by the Jacobean playwrights Frances Beaumont (ca. 1585–1616) and John Fletcher (1579–1625) must begin by mentioning the position of great importance they once held and its almost complete collapse. If one is to trust the various kinds of evidence—the records of performances, the reprintings of their quartos, the contemporary allusions—they were exceedingly popular in their lifetimes. At his death Beaumont was the third writer, after Chaucer and Spenser, to be placed in what has come to be known as the “Poet’s Corner” of Westminster Abbey, apparently out of high regard for his writing.<sup>1</sup> Fletcher by himself also had a strong reputation. But the dominant impression in the seventeenth century was of a joint achievement and equal admiration for the “Parnassus biceps,” as they are described in 1647 in a poem on the title page of the First Folio edition of their work.

The folio, with a portrait of Fletcher as the frontispiece (on which it is mentioned that he was the son of the bishop of London), containing thirty-four plays and thirty-five commendatory poems, some by the most important literary figures of the time, appears to have been prepared as a volume to rival the folios of Shakespeare and Jonson. For this there may have been ulterior motives. It has been suggested that the folio, published as it was in the middle of the Civil War, was designed to exploit sentimental associations with the “good old days” before the cohorts of Sir Hudibras began to destroy the great works

<sup>1</sup> I state the matter thus because his far less distinguished poet-brother Sir John was also placed there in 1627, but in his case it would seem a result of his connection to George Villiers, duke of Buckingham, whose mother was a Beaumont. Villiers did not achieve his supreme position at court until after Francis Beaumont’s death. Evidence for the significance of Francis Beaumont’s placement in the abbey is included at the end of chapter 1.

of time. Relying upon Beaumont and Fletcher's popularity among the gentry, the folio may have been produced as "a propagandist reassertion of the Stuart ethic at a crucial moment in the fortunes of the Court."<sup>2</sup> The evidence for this theory includes its production by the royalist publisher Humphrey Moseley, the apparent involvement in the project of the cavalier propagandist Sir John Berkenhead, and the explicit sentiments of some of the prefatory poems, almost all of which were written by avowed royalists. One contributor went so far as to suggest that in the present atmosphere it might even be dangerous to profess admiration for Fletcher, and the omission of the last word in one passage confirms the volatile political atmosphere:

whether to commend thy Worke, will stand  
Both with the Lawes of verse and of the Land,  
Were to put doubts might raise a discontent  
Between the Muses and the [Parliament].<sup>3</sup>

Another contributor asserted that a stalwart general in one of the plays would have chosen to be "o'th' Better side" in the Civil War.<sup>4</sup> Still another somehow found Fletcher a political philosopher who taught "how kingdomes, in their channel, safely run, / But rudely overflowing are undone."<sup>5</sup>

One can reconstruct personal ties among many of the prefatory poets of the 1647 folio. They were largely cavalier literati who were disposed to see Beaumont and Fletcher from a partisan point of view and to praise them immoderately. Fulsome as was the adulation of many of them, James Shirley set the world record for prefatory blurbs:

but to mention [them], is to throw a cloude upon all former names and benight Posterity; This Book being, without flattery, the greatest Monument of the Scene that Time and Humanity have produced, and must Live, not only the Crowne and sole Reputation of our owne, but the stayne of all other Nations and Languages.<sup>6</sup>

In 1679 the Second Folio added eighteen more plays. During the Restoration, according to Dryden, two "Beaumont & Fletcher" plays

<sup>2</sup> P. W. Thomas, *Sir John Berkenhead (1617–1679): A Royalist Career in Politics and Polemics* (Oxford, 1969), p. 134.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Glover and A. R. Waller, eds., *The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher* (Cambridge, 1905–12), 1:xvii. As far as I have been able to determine, Alexander Dyce in his edition, *The Works of Beaumont and Fletcher* (London, 1843–46), 1:xvi, was the first to insert the obvious omitted word.

<sup>4</sup> Glover and Waller, *Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*, 1:xxii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvi.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

were performed for every one by Jonson and Shakespeare. Every age has its inflated reputations, but what is most striking in this case is the quality of the critics—to cite only the greatest, Jonson and Dryden—who took it for granted that these plays would “rise / A glorified worke to Time.”<sup>7</sup> It was a judgment about which the age felt as assured as we do about the permanence of Joyce, Yeats, and Eliot.<sup>8</sup>

From these heights the decline of Beaumont and Fletcher was precipitous and swift. With the reformation and sentimentalization of the stage in the eighteenth century, it was natural that performance of their plays, with their frank and often obscene language, would be drastically curtailed. Some vestiges of their high reputation persisted well into the nineteenth century as one can deduce from the appearance of six editions between 1711 and 1846. Keats and Wordsworth expressed admiration for their work, but for the most part Beaumont and Fletcher did not profit from the rediscovery of the lesser Elizabethan dramatists. Lamb found them “an inferior sort of Shakespeares and Sidneys,”<sup>9</sup> and Coleridge used them as whipping boys for the glorification of Shakespeare. He found the form of their plays mechanical, not organic; their characterization defective; and their morality reprehensible. Perhaps most damning was his accusation that their politics were those of “servile *jure divino* Royalists.”<sup>10</sup>

Not even the large-scale resurrection of the Jacobean dramatists in the twentieth century restored much of Beaumont and Fletcher’s lost glory. T. S. Eliot’s assessment played the most important part in their present status. He chose not to devote a separate essay to them in his studies of Elizabethan drama, and with one brilliant phrase in his essay on Jonson he administered the coup de grace: “the blossoms of Beaumont and Fletcher’s imagination draw no sustenance from the soil, but are cut and slightly withered flowers stuck in the sand.”<sup>11</sup> Today the only play of theirs that is widely admired and performed

<sup>7</sup> Ben Jonson, “To the worthy Author M. John Fletcher,” in Cyrus Hoy’s edition of *The Faithful Shepherdess* for Fredson Bowers, gen. ed., *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon* (Cambridge, 1966–), 3:492, ll. 14–15.

<sup>8</sup> See the various studies of this phenomenon by Arthur C. Sprague, *Beaumont and Fletcher on the Restoration Stage* (Cambridge, Mass., 1926); Lawrence Wallis, *Fletcher, Beaumont, and Company* (New York, 1947); and John Harold Wilson, *The Influence of Beaumont and Fletcher on Restoration Drama* (Columbus, Ohio, 1928).

<sup>9</sup> “Specimens of English Dramatic Poets” in *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas (New York, 1903–5), 4:285n.

<sup>10</sup> *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Roberta F. Brinkley (Durham, N.C., 1955), p. 655. Coleridge’s charge has reappeared in a more sophisticated form in J. L. Danby’s statement in *Poets on Fortune’s Hill* (London, 1952) that the “declassé son of the Bishop and the younger son of the Judge are James’s unconscious agents” (p. 157). The use of “unconscious” puts Danby in an unassailable position.

<sup>11</sup> “Ben Jonson,” *Selected Essays, 1917–1932* (New York, 1932), p. 135.

with any regularity is the least characteristic of their work, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. On the literary stock exchange Beaumont and Fletcher are generally consigned to the fourth level of Elizabethan-Jacobean dramatists. Not merely excluded from a share of the position just below Shakespeare with Marlowe and Jonson, they are not even granted equality with Middleton, Tourneur, and Webster; it is even questionable whether they are admitted as the peers of Chapman, Ford, and Marston. They have been cast as the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of Jacobean drama, "deferential, glad to be of use" to king and court.

Eliot's devastating formulation was a characteristic adaptation (unacknowledged) of an adverse criticism of a play of Sir John Suckling's by Richard Flecknoe in his *A Short Discourse of the English Stage* of 1664: "Beaumont and Fletcher first writ in the Heroick way, upon whom Suckling and others endeavored to refine agen; one saying wittily of his *Aglaura* that 'twas full of fine flowers, but they seem'd rather stuck than growing there."<sup>12</sup> The wit whom Flecknoe quotes lived closer than Eliot to the collaborators' blossoms and was, in fact, responding to something he perceived as fresh and vital. But this vitality grew out of the richly rotting soil of the court and country of King James. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688 with Parliament, guided by the common law, in firm control of the kingdom, the crucial political dimension of these plays—as this book argues—was ignored or misconstrued, and with it much of their power withered away in the sandy soil.

Eliot concludes a comparison of a passage of dramatic verse by Beaumont and Fletcher to one by Jonson thus:

Detached from its context, this looks like the verse of the greater poets; just as lines of Jonson, detached from their context, look like inflated or empty fustian. But the evocative quality of the verse of Beaumont and Fletcher depends upon a clever appeal to emotions and associations which they have not themselves grasped; it is hollow. It is superficial with a vacuum behind it.<sup>13</sup>

Some years ago I responded to Eliot's passage by attempting "to show that Beaumont and Fletcher felt as Eliot did about the rhetoric of their characters. Their plays dramatize a moral vacuum and a hollow center. They are not signs of the decadence of the Jacobean theater; as much as the more blatant examples of Marston and Tourneur,

<sup>12</sup> *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Joel Spingarn (Oxford, 1908), 2:92.

<sup>13</sup> *Selected Essays*, p. 135.



they are plays that comment on the decadence of the age."<sup>14</sup> I reached this conclusion from a brief study of the collaborators' family backgrounds, their social placement, their friends and connections, the influences on their plays, and above all the evidence of the plays themselves. I suggested that the playwrights' aims were almost precisely the opposite of those usually assigned to them. By attempting to replant Beaumont and Fletcher in their native garden, I hoped to restore some of the original sheen to their withered flowers. But as Captain Gulliver said about the tepid response to the publication of his voyages, I cannot find that my article "has produced one single effect according to my intentions." The place of Beaumont and Fletcher in the histories of Jacobean drama has remained unchanged. Cyril Connolly once said, "Within every fat man, there is a thin man struggling to get out." I had always felt that leanness was the most desirable and efficient form for all bodies, but the response to my essay has convinced me that in this case the opposite is necessary, that my claims can only be persuasive in a fattened version, one that presents its case as fully and with as many of what John Adams called "stubborn facts" as I can muster. This does not mean that I discuss the entire vast corpus. It will be enough for the case I want to make if I restrict myself to the relatively small number of plays Beaumont and Fletcher wrote in collaboration, and to enough of Fletcher's solo plays to demonstrate that he adhered to the same attitudes and convictions when writing alone.

To substantiate my belief that political criticism of court and king was a central urge in the most important plays of Beaumont and Fletcher, I found it necessary to write two separate essays, to which I frequently refer here. The first denies to the Jacobean court the central role of patronage and influence toward the drama, particularly that of Beaumont and Fletcher, that it is frequently accorded. The second argues that Jacobean censorship was somewhat less efficient and formidable and that the drama was politically freer than it is usually described.<sup>15</sup> These essays clear the ground for the elaboration of my view that the Age of Shakespeare and Donne and Jonson was not utterly foolish in taking seriously the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher, that their plays are more significant and attractive than they have been portrayed, and that their fundamental thrust is in a radically different direction from that normally accorded them.

<sup>14</sup> "Beaumont, Fletcher, and 'Beaumont & Fletcher': Some Distinctions," *English Literary Renaissance* 1 (1971): 163.

<sup>15</sup> "The Role of the Court in the Development of Jacobean Drama," *Criticism* 24 (1982): 138–58; and "The Comedians' Liberty': Censorship of the Jacobean Stage Reconsidered," *English Literary Renaissance* 16 (1986): 123–38.

## Chapter One

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### THE COUNTRY, THE PLAYHOUSE, AND THE MERMAID: THE THREE WORLDS OF BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER

How Angels (Cloyster'd in our humane Cells)  
Maintaine their parley, Beaumont-Fletcher tels;  
Whose strange unimitable Intercourse  
Transcends all Rules, and flyes beyond the force  
Of the most forward soules; all must submit  
Untill they reach these Mysteries of Wit.  
—John Pettus (1647)

THE ASTONISHING consistency of texture of the plays of “Beaumont-Fletcher” has led many to assume a virtual interchangeability of the identities of these writers, as expressed in the couplet, “For still your fancies are so wov’n and knit, / ’Twas FRANCIS FLETCHER, OR JOHN BEAUMONT writ.”<sup>1</sup> In a famous phrase John Aubrey spoke of a “wonderful consimility of fancy,”<sup>2</sup> for which an admirer suggested a biographical explanation: “Mitre and Coyfe here into One Piece spun, / BEAUMONT a Judge’s, This a Prelat’s sonne.”<sup>3</sup> The Castor and Pollux of the English stage, as Thomas Fuller designated them,<sup>4</sup> in fact had backgrounds so different that friendship, much less harmonious collaboration, might well have been impossible. Theirs is a story of parallels that eventually converged.

#### BEAUMONT’S FAMILY HISTORY

Thirty years after Francis Beaumont’s death, the publisher Humphrey Moseley attempted to obtain the playwright’s picture for the

<sup>1</sup> George Lisle in 1647 folio, Arnold Glover and A. R. Waller, eds., *The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher* (Cambridge, 1905–12), 1:xxii.

<sup>2</sup> *Brief Lives*, ed. Anthony Powell (New York, 1949), p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> Sir John Berkenhead in 1647 folio, Glover and Waller, *Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*, 1:xliv.

<sup>4</sup> *The Histories of the Worthies of England*, ed. P. Austin Nuttall (London, 1840), 2:513.

1647 folio edition of the collaborators' plays. He tried two sources: "those *Noble Families* whence he was descended" and "those Gentlemen that were his acquaintance when he was of the *Inner Temple*."<sup>5</sup> There was a third group he might have tried: surviving colleagues from his days at the Bankside where he lived and worked. But by the time Moseley began his project, this base resource might have been forgotten because in the interval the "nobility" of Beaumont's family had come to be stressed.<sup>6</sup> This development happened to coincide with the ascendancy at court of the handsome George Villiers, eventually duke of Buckingham, whose mother Maria Beaumont Villiers was a poor relation of the branch of the Leicestershire Beaumonts who lived at Coleorton. Moseley's impression of Beaumont's noble descent would seem to be corroborated by the pedigree that Charles Mills Gayley constructed in 1914.<sup>7</sup> There one may discover the most august aristocratic families in England: Cavendish, Talbot, Nevil, Hastings, even Plantagenet. But a close examination will confirm the well-known fact that if one searches far enough, one can discover relationships among almost all the gentry families in Elizabethan England.

Within the Beaumonts' own family—certainly among the leaders in Leicestershire—the branch living at Coleorton seems to have been the most important. It was not until the appearance of Francis's grandfather John (fl. 1529–54) that his immediate family became prominent, or to be exact, notorious. This John Beaumont had a meteoric career as a lawyer and judge that reached its height with his appointment as Master of the Rolls in 1550. In the best Tudor manner he amassed much property from the Reformation, including the eventual family seat, a recently dissolved priory at Grace Dieu, Leicestershire. His second wife, Elizabeth Hastings, was collaterally related to the greatest family in the county, the earls of Huntingdon. Before this marriage (ca. 1540) Beaumont had been involved in a serious feud with George, first earl of Huntingdon. In 1538 John Beaumont wrote to Lord Cromwell, complaining that the earl "doth labour to take the seyd abbey [Grace Dieu] ffrom me; . . . for I do

<sup>5</sup> Glover and Waller, *Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*, I:xiv.

<sup>6</sup> A poem by Thomas Bancroft speaks of Shakespeare's "height," Jonson's "weight," Chapman's "fame," and Beaumont's "name": *The Jonson Allusion Book*, ed. Jesse F. Bradley and J. Q. Adams (New Haven, Conn., 1922), p. 175.

<sup>7</sup> *Beaumont, the Dramatist* (New York, 1914), tables A, B, C, D. While a valuable study, it must be used with caution. The most reliable material on the background of the Beaumonts appears in the introduction by Roger Sell to his edition of the poems of Francis Beaumont's brother, *The Shorter Poems of Sir John Beaumont*, Acta Academiae Aaboensis (Aabo, Sweden, 1974), 49:3–26. Dr. Sell's work expands on Mark Eccles's biographical sketch of Sir John Beaumont.

ffeyre the erle and hys sonnes do seeke my lyffe.”<sup>8</sup> After his marriage to the earl’s relative, the relationship became more amicable. Judge Beaumont’s public career ended in shame and scandal when it was discovered that he had abused his position by engaging in forgery and speculation on a vast scale. As receiver general of the Court of Wards he managed to cheat the Crown of no less than twelve thousand pounds. Joel Hurstfield concludes that Beaumont was “a man of ability, an experienced lawyer and judge, who might have risen higher but for his failure to recognise that there was a limit to speculation, even in the Tudor age.”<sup>9</sup> John Beaumont’s punishment involved imprisonment and the forfeiture of all his estates to Francis, second earl of Huntingdon (his enemy, the first earl, having died). Probably this arrangement was a legal maneuver or a prearranged stratagem (perhaps inspired by the family connection), since John’s wife Elizabeth was allowed to regain possession of the bulk of his land and fortune after his death.<sup>10</sup>

The relative lenity of the punishment is confirmed by the fact that the dramatist’s father, also named Francis, does not seem to have suffered from his father’s misdeeds. He too became a lawyer and eventually a judge of the Court of Common Pleas. Unlike his father, he was described after his death as a “grave, learned, and reverend judge.”<sup>11</sup> Clearly, he was quite affluent by the time he made his will, which lists estates in ten parishes in Leicestershire and others elsewhere and provides many generous bequests.<sup>12</sup> His marriage to Anne Pierrepont of nearby Holme-Pierrepont, Nottinghamshire, is also a measure of the Grace Dieu Beaumonts’ status since the notoriously ambitious Bess of Hardwick was willing to permit one of her daughters, Francis Cavendish, to marry Anne Pierrepont’s brother Henry.

#### THE BEAUMONTS’ RECUSANCY

If John Beaumont’s peculations did not cause his descendants to live under a cloud, other activities of the family certainly did. It was

<sup>8</sup> Gayley, *Beaumont, the Dramatist*, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> *The Queen’s Wards* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), p. 226.

<sup>10</sup> See the entry for John Beaumont in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter *DNB*).

<sup>11</sup> William Burton in *Description of Leicester Shire* (1622), quoted by Gayley, *Beaumont, the Dramatist*, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> See his will in Alexander Dyce, ed., *Works of Beaumont and Fletcher* (London, 1843–46), 1:lxix–xc. Another sign of his wealth is his loan in 1584 of two hundred pounds to his noble relation, the third earl of Huntingdon. The quarrel between the families was now apparently resolved. See Claire Cross, *The Puritan Earl* (London, 1966), p. 109.

known as long ago as 1914 with the publication of Gayley's book that Anne Beaumont Vaux, the daughter of Judge Francis Beaumont's sister Elizabeth, was intimately involved in the Gunpowder Plot, as were her relatives the Treshams. We now know that the playwright's grandmother (Elizabeth Hastings Beaumont), two of his uncles (the aforementioned Henry and his brother Gervase Pierrepont), his mother, and even his father before he became a judge were also active recusants. As Mark Eccles describes the situation,

[Beaumont's] mother Anne . . . denied in 1581 that she had harbored Edmund Campion [the Jesuit priest and martyr], but the [Privy] Council sent for the books and writings found at Gracedieu and ordered the "Massing stuffe" to be defaced. . . . While her brother Gervase Pierrepont was in prison for having concealed Campion, the government seized letters that Francis [Sr.] and Anne had sent him with two fallow deer pies. Anne Beaumont was again examined at the time of the Throckmorton plot [1583], when the commissioners also described "old Mrs. Beaumont" [the dramatist's mother] . . . as "a recusant and great favourer of papists." . . . Even [the dramatist's father] Francis Beaumont was charged in 1591 with having been hitherto a large contributor to seminary priests, but when he became a justice of the assize he executed the laws and sentenced Walpole and other priests to death for treason.<sup>13</sup>

For punishment, in 1581 Anne Beaumont was put under house arrest, and two prominent neighbors, Adrian Stokes and Sir Francis Hastings, were charged to keep watch over her.<sup>14</sup> The degree of involvement of the Pierreponts in recusant activities was even greater than Eccles reported. Gervase Pierrepont was one of Edmund Campion's most trustworthy guides on his hazardous priestly mission through the countryside. Henry Pierrepont eventually agreed to conform, but Gervase remained an implacable recusant. As late as 1601 he was imprisoned and tortured in the Tower for his activities.<sup>15</sup>

Judge Beaumont and Anne Pierrepont had four children: Henry, born ca. 1581; John, born ca. 1583–84; Francis, born ca. 1585; and Elizabeth, born ca. 1588. There is no baptismal record for any of them in the parish register of Belton, a fact that leads to the suspicion

<sup>13</sup> "A Biographical Dictionary of Elizabethan Authors," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 5 (1941–42): 294. The Coleorton branch of the Beaumonts was virulently anti-Catholic. See Richard S. Smith, "Huntingdon Beaumont: Adventurer in Coal Mines," *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 1 (1957): 115–53, esp. Beaumont's statement on pp. 149–50.

<sup>14</sup> *Acts of Privy Council*, August 30, 1581.

<sup>15</sup> See Evelyn Waugh, *Edmund Campion* (New York, 1935), esp. p. 177.

of secret baptism by a Catholic priest.<sup>16</sup> After Judge Beaumont's death in 1598, the oldest of the three brothers, Henry (later Sir Henry),<sup>17</sup> succeeded to the estate; upon his death in 1605 John, also a poet, became the master of Grace Dieu. As Lawrence Stone observed, it was the worst possible moment for a recusant, as John proved to be, to acquire an estate: "Elizabethan parliaments had enacted strict laws against Catholic recusants and in 1605 James saw an easy way of gratifying his followers by granting the right to enforce these laws and to take the profits. . . . The most active period of the grants was between 1605 and 1611, the commonest form being the gift to a courtier of the fine and forfeiture of eight or ten recusants."<sup>18</sup>

Thus began the period of persecution for the Beaumonts of Grace Dieu. As Eccles's account describes,

John Beaumont succeeded to Gracedieu on the death of his brother Sir Henry in July 1605. . . . By October the profits of his recusancy had been allotted to Sir James Sempill, a companion of King James since boyhood. . . . Two-thirds of his lands and all his goods . . . were thereby forfeited to the King and were formally granted in 1607 to Sempill, who was still profiting from them in 1615. . . . [John] Beaumont was now required to live at Gracedieu, . . . "beynge a Recusant Convicted And remayninge confyned to hys house."<sup>19</sup>

Francis Beaumont himself seems not to have maintained the family faith. I draw this conclusion from the Leicestershire clergyman Thomas Pestell's praise of Beaumont's adeptness at confuting Jesuits, many of whom passed through Grace Dieu:

The Jesuits that trace witt and subtiltye,  
And are mere cryticks in Divinitie;  
Who to the soadring a crackt cause allow  
Sett fees for every new distinction; thou [Beaumont]

<sup>16</sup> Sell, *Shorter Poems of Beaumont*, pp. 4–5. Sell has unearthed a wealth of material to corroborate the family's staunch adherence to their faith.

<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting that both of Francis Beaumont's brothers were knighted but that Francis was not. This is consistent with his character as I try to convey it in this book. Note that the dramatist's brother Henry is not to be confused with his uncle Henry, brother of Francis, Sr., or with Sir Henry of Coleorton.

<sup>18</sup> *The Crisis of the Aristocracy* (Oxford, 1965), p. 440. See also Samuel Gardiner, *History of England . . . (1603–1642)* (London, 1895), 2:18–20, for a graphic description of the persecution of recusants in the years of hysteria just after the Gunpowder Plot.

<sup>19</sup> "A Biographical Dictionary," p. 295. A Sir Henry Hastings was similarly penalized at the same time, the money going to Lady Elizabeth Stuart. Coincidentally, the earlier nemesis, neighbor and relation Sir Francis Hastings, got into trouble for his Puritanism and was confined to his house in Somerset. See Cross, *Puritan Earl*, p. 51.

By a clean strength of witt and judgment wert  
Well able to confound, if not convert.<sup>20</sup>

But in assessing the attitude toward princes and courts in Beaumont's plays, it is useful to recall that during the entire period in which he was a writer, most of the income from his family's estate was being siphoned off by the Crown to a Scottish crony of the king while Beaumont's brother John was virtually imprisoned on his own land.<sup>21</sup>

#### BEAUMONT'S CONNECTION WITH THE INNER TEMPLE

By now it should be clear that it begs many questions merely to label Beaumont as an affluent member of the gentry with noble relations. There is a further complication if one considers another group to which the publisher Moseley connects Beaumont, the "Gentlemen . . . of the Inner Temple." Of course, many of the gentry passed through the Inns of Court for a brief time, but the Beaumonts' connection was different: they were a veritable Inner Temple dynasty. Francis's infamous grandfather John twice served as reader (a tribute to his legal scholarship but also to his wealth); he also was the society's leading officer, known as treasurer, for many years. The playwright's father, Francis, Sr., and uncle Henry also rose to eminence at the Temple. Both were readers; Francis, Sr., was also a member of the governing body known as benchers. All three of his sons spent some time at the Inner Temple. About the social position of lawyers in early seventeenth-century English society Wallace Notestein wrote, "by virtue of their manner of education and discipline, they had become almost a class in society, a class with which the Government had to reckon as with the nobility and the gentry."<sup>22</sup> If one considers that every male in the Grace Dieu branch of the Beaumont family for three generations was a member of the Inner Temple and that in the first two generations they were successful, important lawyers, judges, and officers of their Inn, it may be argued that the "class" into which Francis Beaumont was born was this special subclass of lawyers.

Many of the important participants in the battles between James and Parliament resided at the Inns of Court; naturally (as one knows from diaries and memoirs) their attitudes and points of view provoked discussion in the halls and studies of the Inns. The most prom-

<sup>20</sup> These are lines 35–40 of Pestell's elegy on Beaumont, reproduced in full in appendix B.

<sup>21</sup> As I implied earlier, the situation improved greatly for Sir John Beaumont once his cousin Villiers became King James's favorite.

<sup>22</sup> *The Winning of the Initiative by the House of Commons* (London, 1924), pp. 49–50.

inent member of the Inner Temple at that time, Sir Edward Coke, was surely James's most outspoken opponent; and among the young Francis Beaumont's coevals at the Inner Temple was the great scholar and defender of the common law, John Selden, who was almost the same age as Beaumont and admitted to the Temple in 1603.

An even more direct conduit to the politics of the day would have been the Leicestershire cousins Sir Henry Beaumont of Coleorton, an executor of Francis, Sr.'s, will, and this Henry's brother, Sir Thomas Beaumont of Staunton Grange. Both were members of Parliament,<sup>23</sup> and in his study *The House of Commons (1604–1610)*, Notestein singled out these two Beaumonts as "early English liberals, who stood for the individual."<sup>24</sup> Sir Henry only lived until 1605, but throughout the period when Francis was writing plays, Sir Thomas was a constant, outspoken critic of the king. In a conference between James and thirty members of the Commons in 1610, Thomas made a classic statement on the function of the law. As paraphrased by a reporter, he said, "The walls between the King and his people were the laws. If ministers of state leaped over them and broke them down, what security was there for the subject? Contempt for the law was as dangerous to the Commonwealth as a tormented spirit to the body." Notestein concludes, "Beaumont's words suggest a desperation that may have been affecting many members of the House."<sup>25</sup>

Descended from a family of lawyers, judges, and M.P.s—some prominent opponents of the court, some suffering court-inspired persecution for their religious beliefs—Francis Beaumont was brought up in an atmosphere that could hardly have favored the new Stuart dynasty.

#### FLETCHER'S BACKGROUND AND LIFE

Few facts are known about John Fletcher's own life, but a great deal of enlightening information exists about his ancestry, background, and social connections. As with Beaumont the story begins with his paternal grandfather. Far from having any Plantagenets (however distant) in his pedigree, Richard Fletcher, Sr., came from humble stock—"honestis parentibus natus," according to the plaque erected in his memory by his sons. He was ordained by the soon-to-be-martyred Bishop Ridley in 1550, made vicar of Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire, in 1551, but was deprived of this position under Queen

<sup>23</sup> I have been unable to discover whether either was a member of the Inner Temple, although both seem to have had sons who were.

<sup>24</sup> (New Haven, Conn., 1971), p. 507.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410.



Mary. It is recorded by Foxe in the *Book of Martyrs* that in this dark period Richard Fletcher and his son Richard, Jr., John Fletcher's father, witnessed in 1555 the burning of the Protestant martyr Christopher Wade. Later in Mary's reign the elder Fletcher was imprisoned for his religious beliefs.<sup>26</sup>

After the accession of Elizabeth, Richard Fletcher, Sr., served as vicar of Cranbrooke, Kent. He produced two distinguished sons. The younger one, Giles (ca. 1548–1611), was a diplomat, member of Parliament, government official, and author of the sonnet sequence *Licia* (1595). His comprehensive account, *Of the Russe Commonwealth*, published after his return from a mission to Russia, is a remarkably perceptive study still cited by historians. Two of Giles's sons were the well-known "Spenserian" poets, Giles, Jr., and Phineas.

John's father, Richard Fletcher (d. 1596), had a brilliant career, at least until its disastrous last chapter. He was educated at Bene't (now Corpus Christi) College at Cambridge and was briefly its chief officer in 1573. During his ministry at Rye, which began in 1574, his handsome appearance, elegant manner, and ability as a preacher brought him to the attention of Queen Elizabeth. He became chaplain to the queen in 1581 and dean of Peterborough in 1583; he also held other rich livings. As chaplain at the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, he took a prominent part in the proceedings. Possibly his notoriously stern "Amen" at the moment of execution in response to the ritualistic intonement of "So perish all the Queen's enemies" was inspired by his memory of the Protestant martyrdoms he observed in his childhood. His rivals claimed it was a bid for the queen's favor, which certainly followed.

In quick succession Fletcher became bishop of Bristol (1589), Worcester (1593), and London (1595). This last position must have been most convenient for this "praesul splendidus" (as Camden described him)<sup>27</sup> because he already owned a house in Chelsea and spent more time at court than at any of his dioceses. In his petition to Lord Burleigh for the bishopric in London, he mentioned his desire to "be nearer the court, where his presence was accustomed

<sup>26</sup> For the lives of Richard Fletcher, Jr., and Sr., see Lloyd E. Berry's introduction to his edition, *The English Works of Giles Fletcher, the Elder* (Madison, Wis., 1964) and the entry for Richard Fletcher in the *DNB*. As with Beaumont's, Fletcher's pedigree by Gayley in *Beaumont, the Dramatist*, table E, headed "Fletcher, Baker, Sackville," is rather misleading. Insofar as John Fletcher had a tie to the august Sackvilles, the earls of Dorset, it could scarcely have been more tenuous, deriving from his father's brief marriage to Maria, the widow of Sir Richard Baker. Maria's late husband's sister was married to Richard Sackville, first earl of Dorset.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted from the *DNB* article on Richard Fletcher.

much to be, and his influence might be of use to serve the court.”<sup>28</sup> Later he spoke complacently of the “especiall cumfort secular that ever I conceyved to have lived in hir highnes gracious aspect and favour now xxyty yeres past.”<sup>29</sup>

At this point Bishop Fletcher’s luck turned. His first wife, Elizabeth Holland, died in 1592. In 1595, shortly after he became bishop of London, Fletcher married Maria, whose husband, Sir Richard Baker, had died only a few months before. Not only was the marriage overhasty; Maria was notorious for her loose morals. Inevitably, the bishop’s timing and choice of second wife provoked public outrage and cruel amusement. John (later, Sir John) Davies wrote five poems,<sup>30</sup> privately circulated, that plainly called the bishop’s wife a “whore.”<sup>31</sup> In typical Elizabethan fashion he satirized the bishop as much for his lowly origins as for his unseemly actions. In one poem Davies writes, “the match was equall, both had Common geare.”<sup>32</sup> In another he asks,

How can a viccars sonne a Lady make?  
And yet her ladyshipp weare greatly shamd’  
If from her Lord she should no tytyle take;  
Wherefore they shall devide the name of Fletcher:  
He my Llord F, and she my Lady Letcher.<sup>33</sup>

Davies wrote these poems to Richard Martin while they were both resident at the Middle Temple. After holding three bishoprics it was still possible to be ridiculed for one’s humble origins by an Inns of Court wit.<sup>34</sup>

The more tragic consequence of the bishop’s marriage was the queen’s instant, violent displeasure. She banned Fletcher from her presence and suspended him from his episcopal functions. After six months the suspension was lifted, and eventually the queen was willing to receive him. But his own brother Giles attributed Fletcher’s death soon afterward in 1596 to the queen’s actions. In a letter seek-

<sup>28</sup> Dyce, *Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*, 1:ix.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:xii.

<sup>30</sup> The poems were recently and persuasively attributed to him by Robert Krueger in *The Poems of Sir John Davies* (Oxford, 1975). The address of one of the poems to “Martin” led earlier editors to suspect that it was a Martin Marprelate work. Krueger shows that Davies is referring to his friend Richard Martin.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177, no. 12, l. 10.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178, no. 16, l. 8.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 15, ll. 10–14.

<sup>34</sup> Ironically, Davies was similarly sneered at in the Middle Temple revels of 1597–98 because his father was supposedly a tanner. See my *John Marston of the Middle Temple: An Elizabethan Dramatist in His Social Setting* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), p. 53.

ing financial aid for the family, Giles wrote, "He hath satisfied the error of his late marriage with his untimely and unlooked for death, which proceeded specially from the conceit of her Highnes displeasure and indignation conceived against him."<sup>35</sup>

At his death the bishop left debts of fourteen hundred pounds, partly the result of his rapid advancement with an attendant crippling succession of "first fruits" payments. In addition, for the London episcopacy Fletcher had to pay—in the corrupt manner such matters were effected—no less than twenty-one hundred pounds in "*douceurs*" to various courtiers.<sup>36</sup> Along with his debts—eventually forgiven through the intercession of the earl of Essex—the bishop consigned his eight children to the guardianship of his brother Giles, who had nine of his own and very slim financial resources.

The dramatist John Fletcher, the fourth of the bishop's children, was born in 1579 in Rye.<sup>37</sup> Of his early years not much is known with certainty. It is claimed that he attended his father's college, Bene't, Cambridge, starting in 1591, receiving a B.A. in 1595 and an M.A. in 1598.<sup>38</sup> After his father's death in 1596 John apparently lived with his uncle in what could only have been a very crowded London house for some years; he was almost certainly still living there in 1601.<sup>39</sup> His uncle's troubles were compounded by a nearly fatal complicity in the Essex conspiracy, after which the all-powerful and indispensable Burleigh and his son never completely trusted him. He received no significant preferment thereafter. Giles and his children blamed their poverty directly on King James. The king had made Giles great promises before he came to England, but as his son Phineas Fletcher wrote in 1610, "his promise [was] writ in sand."<sup>40</sup> Richard and Giles Fletcher's families had good reasons for believing that they had been mistreated by personal acts of commission and omission by both Eliz-

<sup>35</sup> Dyce, *Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*, 1:xiv–xv.

<sup>36</sup> See Christopher Hill, *Economic Problems of the Church* (Oxford, 1963), p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> The house of his birth survives; it is now a tearoom.

<sup>38</sup> J. and J. A. Venn, comps., *Alumni Cantabrigienses* (Cambridge, 1922), part 1, 2:149.

<sup>39</sup> In *English Works of Giles Fletcher*, Lloyd Berry lists all of Giles's children. In 1601 five were still alive. At the same time eight of Bishop Fletcher's were alive. Since his oldest son, Nathaniel, brought suit against Giles in 1600 claiming that he had mismanaged the bishop's estate, it is most unlikely that he would have been living under the same roof. The presence of John at his uncle's home would therefore be required to make true Giles's statement of 1601 that his family consisted of "a wyfe and 12. poor children" (p. 404).

<sup>40</sup> "Piscatorie Eclogues" in *The Poetical Works of Giles Fletcher and Phineas Fletcher*, ed. Frederick S. Boas (Cambridge, 1909), 2:178. The identification of "Amintas" in the first eclogue with King James has been demonstrated by Lloyd E. Berry, "Phineas Fletcher's Account of His Father," *Journal of English and German Philology* 60 (1961): 258ff.

abeth and James, and some members of both families responded bitterly. There is no direct evidence that John Fletcher felt similarly, but certainly nothing in his early life made him any more enthusiastic a proponent of the monarchy and the court than Beaumont. For both writers the provocations to alienation were many and strong.

Fletcher's social placement is thus paradoxical. Presumably, he spent his childhood in sumptuous bishop's palaces. For at least twenty years his father was a familiar figure at court. Queen Elizabeth may once have paid a visit to his home in Chelsea, for which according to legend a special entrance was constructed.<sup>41</sup> Since Fletcher was sixteen at the time of his father's death, the memories of a glamorous early life must have been vivid. Perhaps no professional English playwright had as much opportunity as Fletcher to learn about and see the workings of a court. Nonetheless, when he began to associate with Beaumont in the early 1600s he must have resembled the indigent Cambridge graduates in the "Parnassus" plays. Writing was his only alternative to the sort of meager country parsonages to which his brother Nathaniel and his cousins Giles, Jr., and Phineas were bitterly rusticated.

#### BEAUMONT AS INNS OF COURT WIT

Of course, Beaumont never became a lawyer. He may have entered the Inner Temple with the family vocation in mind, but he did not complete his legal studies. After a brief period along with his brothers at Broadgates College, Oxford, in 1596–1597, he apparently left college after the death of his father in 1598. Both older brothers were admitted to the Inner Temple in 1597, and Francis was admitted in 1600.

A shaft of light into Beaumont's youthful sensibility has survived in the form of a speech he delivered at the Christmas revels of the Inner Temple around 1605.<sup>42</sup> Cast in the form of a "grammar lec-

<sup>41</sup> Dyce, *Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*, 1:xii, n.x.

<sup>42</sup> Mark Eccles, "Francis Beaumont's *Grammar Lecture*," *Review of English Studies* 16 (1940): 402–14. The precise date of the speech is unclear. It must have been delivered between 1600, when Beaumont was admitted, and the period when he presumably left the Temple to write, sometime around 1606. I lean toward the later date, "ca. 1605," assigned it by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter *OED*), simply because Beaumont sounds much older than the "young students" whom he is treating with much condescension, and his observations sound as if they were based on years of experience in London. The later this speech is dated, the more likely is it that Beaumont started at the Inner Temple with the intention of studying the law and that his playwriting began (ca. 1606) when he (like Marston) abandoned the law. His legal studies would then