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## Beaumont's Lives

*This essay explores the 'lives' of Francis Beaumont at the point of the four hundredth anniversary of his death, through elegies by John Earle and Thomas Pestell and hitherto unknown and newly interpreted biographical information that sheds fresh light on the relationship between his life and works. Focusing in particular on his plays *The Scornful Lady* and *The Woman Hater*, it argues that Beaumont and his regular collaborator, John Fletcher, mix (auto)biographical allusions with satire and fantasy. This analysis offers new perspectives on the ways in which their imaginations were sparked by their lived experience.*

The four hundredth anniversary of the death of Francis Beaumont in 2016 provides an opportunity to think again about his life, and the narratives that have become attached to it. Beaumont is among the more elegized of early modern dramatists. Tributes include those of his older brother John, Thomas Pestell, and John Earle, and some of these poems circulated widely: Earle's appears not only in the 1647 edition of *Comedies and Tragedies Written by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher Gentlemen* and the 1653 edition of *Poems: By Francis Beaumont, Gent.*, but also in at least nine manuscript copies.<sup>1</sup> These elegies present their own versions of Beaumont's life, Pestell's in particular seeking to shape the writer's posthumous reputation in ways that position him as an orthodox member of the Church of England, accepting death with Christian piety. A somewhat racier life is constructed for Beaumont in the late seventeenth-century notebooks of John Aubrey, eventually adapted and published as his *Brief Lives*, which pictures Beaumont and his frequent collaborator, John Fletcher, in lodgings 'on the Banke-side not far from the Play-house', sharing a bed, 'one Wench', and 'the same cloaths and cloake etc: between them'.<sup>2</sup> From Pestell and Aubrey's accounts of Beaumont's life in the seventeenth century, to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's dismissal of Beaumont and Fletcher as 'the most servile jure divino royalists' in the early nineteenth century,

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to Philip Finkelpearl's important rehabilitation of Beaumont's political reputation in the 1990s, commentators have regularly written new lives for him.<sup>3</sup>

Yet if Beaumont had his life written for him after his death, new evidence that I will present in this essay also suggests the extent to which Beaumont wrote versions of his own life into plays such as *The Woman Hater* and *The Scornful Lady*. Freshly uncovered lawsuits, records of financial transactions, and other materials suggest the extent to which the posthumous reputation that his elegists did so much to establish has shaped our ideas about Beaumont, and the extent to which these ideas might need to be reconfigured or revised. These materials also suggest, however, that we have missed some cues within those very elegies, the moments at which they uncover fault-lines in their own presentation of Beaumont, or reveal alternative aspects of the relationship between his life and his work. Setting these documents alongside *The Scornful Lady* and *The Woman Hater* not only suggests new ways of thinking about Beaumont's financial and religious dealings, but also argues that he and Fletcher were exploiting or even manipulating his own contemporary reputation, writing Beaumont's life into their works in ways that both complement and challenge other accounts.

Pestell's elegy makes its own nervously humorous attempts to yoke together Beaumont's works, life, and death. Addressing Death directly, Pestell claims that he has misread Beaumont's recent elegies on Lady Penelope Clifton, Lady Markham, and Elizabeth, countess of Rutland, interpreting them as a challenge to his authority because they preserve so effectively the memories of these women, making them 'live' after their deaths:

Thou slewst him for a spitefull secret grudge,  
 'Cause those quick lines from his live Muse did passe  
 Have marble shedd and everlasting brasse  
 Over three ladies, which still fresh shall be,  
 And live to thy disgrace in memorie.  
 This did so vexee thee, Death, that thou were faine  
 To hire an apoplexe, to shend his braine,  
 Till thou couldst come thyselfe, and hinder so  
 That sprightly nectar which from it did flow;  
 And yet his puissant witt was nere so drie,  
 But even in midst of most infirmitie  
 It crown'd his last worke with so faire an end,  
 'Twould puzzle the best witts alive to mend.<sup>4</sup>

Finkelpearl reads the ‘apoplexe’ described by Pestell literally, arguing convincingly that this was some kind of stroke that left Beaumont incapacitated and in pain but not incapable of limited writerly activity.<sup>5</sup> What interests me here, however, is the way in which Pestell apparently writes biographical detail into his fantasy of the embodied, revengeful Death. Attempting to smooth over both Beaumont’s imagined insult to Death and the very real transgressive edge of his writing, Pestell writes,

Alasse, he wrote it [i.e. his ‘last worke’] in none hate to thee:  
His frequent wishes for thy company,  
And, when thou cam’st, embraces, gave good proof  
He ever lov’d and lik’d thee well enough.

Pestell thus presents Beaumont’s late work as the product of a knowing engagement or battle of wits with Death. Negotiating with Beaumont’s own iconoclastic treatment of death — such as his direct dialogue with Death in the Clifton elegy — and perhaps with John Beaumont’s elegy, which attacks Death as a ‘Murd’rer’,<sup>6</sup> Pestell attempts to reconcile these former enemies, granting Beaumont a ‘good’ death in the face of what he presents as severe physical trauma.

For Finkelpearl, one important aspect of Pestell’s account of the writer’s death is that it ‘clearly indicates that Beaumont, professional that he was, did not stop writing of his own volition’.<sup>7</sup> What interests me here, however, is the elegy’s presentation of Beaumont as in some ways *un*professional, even prodigal, in his handling of his own talent. Pestell compares his own wit unfavourably with Beaumont’s:

All such sleight sylly things as I might steale  
Witt, that thou threwst away at every meale  
(When first I knew thee), with good husbandrie,  
Able to serve us till the day we die.

The young Beaumont is presented here as carelessly throwing away wit that should have been carefully stored, and the image of the prodigal is not far away in another account of his life, John Aubrey’s famous anecdote about the friendship and living arrangements of Beaumont and Fletcher:

there was a wonderfull consimility of phansey between them [<]him[>], which and Mr John Fletcher, which caused that deareness of friendship between them. [ ... ] They lived together on the Banke-side not far from the Play-house, both batchelors

lay\* [\*from Sir James Hales etc:] together, had one Wench in the howse between them 「which they did so admire」, the same cloaths and cloake etc: between them.<sup>8</sup>

Quoting Aubrey's account from Kate Bennett's edition of his manuscript, as I do here, highlights the extent to which this anecdote is a bricolage of false starts, deletions, and additions. It is challenging, and probably beside the point, to distinguish homo- and hetero-eroticism in this thoroughly queer account of Beaumont and Fletcher's lives, or to work out precisely what James Hales was trying to convey when he spoke with Aubrey. The anecdote presents a pair of intertwined, mutually supporting lives that are figured in terms of both pleasure and privation; Beaumont and Fletcher's household arrangements evoke both the ideals of classical friendship and the enforced pooling of resources that poverty might bring with it.

I dwell on the image of prodigality in part because new evidence suggests its more general utility in thinking about the relationship between Beaumont's 'real', textual, and fictive lives. In 1608–10, 'ffrancisco Beaumont de Interiore templo london generoso' was twice sued for debt at the Court of King's Bench.<sup>9</sup> The sums involved were not insubstantial. In the first case, which initially came before the court in Hilary term, 1608, Sir Edward Randill claimed that Beaumont owed him £300 on a bond signed on 8 June 1607 and £100 damages. Beaumont appears to have prevaricated repeatedly about paying his debts. He initially did not appear in court, and later claimed that he had no record of the debt and damages awarded against him; the case was only settled in Michaelmas term, 1610, when Beaumont finally paid the debt and was acquitted. In the second case, heard in Trinity term, 1608, Edward Shorland claimed that Beaumont owed him £200 on a bond signed on 26 October 1607 and £50 damages; Beaumont was unable to offer any defense, and the court awarded Shorland his £200 and 10 shillings damages; I have not yet located any record of whether the debt was actually paid. The existence of an indenture dated 30 June 1609 also indicates Beaumont's financial travails: 'ffrauncis Beaumont of the Inner Temple london, gentleman' agreed to sell to James Riche 'All and singuler the messuages landes tenements and hereditamentes whatsoever in Osgathorpe and Swannington or any of them in the County of Leicester Shere of or wherein the said ffrancis Beaumont hath any estate of inheritaunce in fee simple or fee taile in possession reversion or remainder' for 'the some of ten shillinges of good and lawfull money of England'.<sup>10</sup> Beaumont would presumably have come into these properties, inherited from his father, when he came of age in August 1605.<sup>11</sup> If he was borrowing substantial sums of money in

1607, however, he must either have quickly run through his inheritance or had other, as yet unknown, pressures on his financial resources.

Scholars have often conjectured that Beaumont's financial future was secured when he married Ursula Isley around 1611–13.<sup>12</sup> Ursula and her sister Una were the only children of Henry Isley of Sundridge, Kent, and his wife Jane; Henry's will, drawn up in February 1599, left

all and singuler my mannors Landes Tenements and hereditaments in the countie of Kent or els where ... vnto Jane my Lovinge wief in fee simple ... to the end and purpose that she maye and doe sell or otherwise dispose at her discretion the same, or such parte or soe much thereof as to her shall seeme fitt for the payement of all my iust and true debts ... And also for the bringinge vp and preferment in maryage of Vrsula and Vna the two daughters or children of her the said Jane my Lovinge wief.<sup>13</sup>

Gayley thus imagines Beaumont living at Sundridge 'as a country gentleman', while even the more careful Finkelppearl describes Isley as 'an heiress from Kent'.<sup>14</sup> In fact, her inheritance was as problematic as Beaumont's appears to have been, albeit for different reasons. According to evidence in later lawsuits, Jane and William Meysey entered into a series of complex legal arrangements in order to secure the inheritances of Ursula and Una. Dowries of 1000 marks each, funded by the sale of Henry Isley's property and to be paid when they reached the age of 21, were later revised down to £400 each when Meysey claimed that Isley's debts were greater than originally thought.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, Ursula and Una's portions appear never to have been paid in full, if at all, and both women claimed a right in what remained of their father's property decades after his death. Una came of age around 1612, and around this time she and her husband, Martin Barnham, sold their interest in her inheritance for the sum of £250.<sup>16</sup> Ursula does not appear to have pursued her claim during her marriage with Beaumont, but in 1617 she took possession of Henry Isley's property at Dryhill and Sundridge Mills, claiming the 1000 marks that she was due under the original agreement. Her right to the property was challenged by the heirs of men who claimed to have bought it from the Meyseys, and in 1622–3 she brought two suits against them at Chancery, in which her actions are detailed.<sup>17</sup> Some of the defendants repeatedly refused to answer her bill of complaint, and the court eventually ordered that Ursula 'should quietly hould the possession of the said landes assured to her for the paiement of her porcion of 1000 markes as afore said & might take the rentes yssues & proffites thereof against the defendants & all

Claymes from by or vnder them'.<sup>18</sup> Ursula had finally, it seems, gained the money for her 'preferment in maryage', albeit many years after the death of her husband.

This backdrop of debt, inheritance, property, and financial entanglement provides a striking context for the opening lines of Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Scornful Lady*, in which two brothers discuss the sale of the younger brother's lands:

ELD[ER] LOU[ELESS] B[r]other, is your last hope past to mollifie *Moorecrafts*  
heart about your Morgage?

YO[U]NG LOUE[LESS] Hopelesly past: I haue presented the Vsurer with a richer  
draught, then euer *Cleopatra* swallowed; he hath suckt in ten thousand  
pownds worth of my Land, more then hee paid for at a gulpe, without  
Trumpets.

EL[DER] LO[VELESS] I haue as hard a task to performe in this house.  
yo[ung] lo[veless] Faith mine was to make a Vserer honest, or to loose  
my land.

EL[DER] LO[VELESS] And mine is to perswade a passionate woman, or to leaue  
the Land. (A3r)<sup>19</sup>

The value that Young Loveless places on his lands — £10000 — is a huge sum, especially for the inheritance of a younger brother, and it perhaps signals the extent to which *The Scornful Lady* deals with fantasies of economic and romantic capital, rather than the gritty realities of either kind of dealing. In the context of Beaumont's financial dealings between 1607 and 1610, and the uncertain status of his wife's inheritance, this opening presents a rich and complex set of questions about the relationship between the dramatist and his work, questions which might take on different aspects depending on the precise timing and circumstances of the composition of *The Scornful Lady*. The play is thought to have been written around 1609–13. Most commentators have placed it in 1610, shortly after Beaumont sold his lands to James Riche, close to the time at which he finally paid off his debt to Edward Randill, and not long before his marriage to Ursula, which — as noted above — appears to have taken place at some time between 1611 and 1613.<sup>20</sup> But it may have been written at any time during this period of financial turmoil, and any of these events may have shaped Beaumont's attitude towards the profligacy of Young Loveless. If it was written close to the signing of the indenture with Riche on 30 June 1609, Beaumont may have been engaged in turning a complex set of emotions — be they anxiety, guilt, or relief — into comic fantasy; if it was written later, when Beaumont's finances appear to have been more secure, his self-satire may have had a more relaxed, even complacent, aspect.

The scene quoted above sets up the play's two interwoven plots, each centering on one of the Loveless brothers. Elder Loveless has angered his beloved, the 'Lady' of the title, by wooing her too eagerly, and she has sent him off to travel until he has learned his lesson; Young Loveless has lost his inheritance to a usurer called Morecraft. The twinned narratives work through the ways in which each brother eventually maneuvers his way into marriage and wealth, and a sharp-eyed picture of the younger sibling develops. When Elder Loveless appears to depart on his travels, he leaves Young Loveless with an allowance and the run of his house. The play's second scene puts the younger man's thoughtless prodigality on display, as he welcomes back the dissolute companions who helped him to spend his money the first time around. Telling them 'you are once more welcome to three hundred pounds a yeere', Young Loveless then cries,

wee'l haue it all in drinke, let meate and lodging goe, th'are transitory, and shew men meereley mortall: then wee'l haue wenches, euery one his wench, and euery weeke a fresh one: weelee keepe no powderd fleshe: all these wee haue by warrant vnder the Title of things necessarie. Heere vpon this place I ground it: the obedience of my people, and all necessaries[.] (C1r)

Young Loveless frames his newly reconstituted household as a miniature kingdom, and in Act 2, Scene 3, when the companions think that Elder Loveless has drowned at sea and Young Loveless has inherited his estate, the Poet's remarks reinforce his presentation of a parodic, inverse utopia fueled by drink and sex. 'Doe what you will', he instructs Young Loveless, 'tis the noblest course, then you may liue without the charge of people, onely wee foure will make a family, I and an age that shall beget new *Annals*, in which Ile write thy life my sonne of pleasure, equall with *Noro* [*sic*] or *Caligula*' (E1v). In an odd parallel to Beaumont and Fletcher's tripartite household in Aubrey's anecdote, the Poet imagines a pocket utopia consisting of only four people, and places himself as its chronicler. His examples of Nero and Caligula are, of course, distinctly unpromising, and their incongruity receives emphasis in Young Loveless's question, 'What meane they Captaine?' and the Captain's response: 'Two roring boyes of *Rome* that made all split' (E1v). The worst of the Roman emperors, Nero and Caligula, are pulled out of the classical past and reframed as contemporary revelers.

Young Loveless promptly and unsurprisingly mortgages his new lands to the usurer, Morecraft, for another enormous sum, £6000. A series of twists in the narrative, however, presents not his downfall but what we might think of as prodigal fantasy. Young Loveless first acquires a knighthood on the basis of his inheritance

from his brother, and then acquires a rich widow on the basis of his knighthood, assisted by the newly returned Elder Loveless. The Loveless brothers then unite in rejecting Morecraft's demand to have his money returned to him:

[ELDER] LO[VELESS] What is this fellow brother?

YO[UNG] LO[VELESS] The thirsty Vsurer that supt my Land off:

EL[DER] LO[VELESS] What does he tarry for?

YO[UNG] LO[VELESS] Sir to be Land-lord of your house and state: I was bold to make a little sale Sir.

MO[RECRRAFT] Am I ouer-reacht? if there be law, Ile hamper yee.

EL[DER] LO[VELESS] Prethee bee gone, and raile at home, thou art so base a foole I cannot laugh at thee. Sirrha, this comes of cousening, home and spare, eate reddish til you raise your summes againe. If you stir farre in this, Ile haue you whipt, your eares nayl'd for intelligencing, o'th pillory, and your goods forfeit: you are a stale Cousener, leaue my house: no more. (F4r-v)

*The Scornful Lady* presents prodigality and exploitation as two sides of the same coin, implicitly paralleling Young Loveless's desire to drink away his brother's estate with the 'supp[ing]' of the 'thirsty' usurer that devoured his own lands. Elder Loveless maintains this metaphor when he suggests that Morecraft physically purge himself until he regains his money, but the play offers a different story, in which the usurer himself turns prodigal. He tells Young Loveless a few scenes later, 'Ile follow thy example: thou hadst land and thousands, thou spendst, and flungst away, and yet it flowes in double: I purchasde, wrung, and wierdraw'd for my wealth, lost, and was cozend: for which I make a vowe, to trie all the waies about ground, but Ile finde a constant meanes to riches without curses' (I4r). In this inversion of conventional wisdom, prodigality becomes a form of investment and a means of salvation for the usurer, whose new 'bad' life is paradoxically a good life.

In its presentation of the prodigal younger son who wastes his own resources but eventually comes out on top, *The Scornful Lady* thus writes a life, of sorts, for Beaumont, fulfilling in its own peculiar way the Poet's promise within the play: 'Ile write thy life'. But the writing of that 'life' was itself a complex business. According to Cyrus Hoy, whose work remains the most detailed attempt to apportion the plays of the 'Beaumont and Fletcher' canon, Beaumont wrote the first scene, in which Young Loveless's prodigal disposal of his estate is first invoked, but all of the other scenes quoted above were drafted by Fletcher before Beaumont

did the final work of revision to the text.<sup>21</sup> Apportioning scenes is, of course, a blunt instrument when considering collaborative authorship, and strikingly, two of the few images of Beaumont and Fletcher working together stress the collective nature of their work. An anecdote that survives in two versions — one recorded by Thomas Fuller and the other in a 1660s jest-book — describes the pair working together to ‘contrive’ the ‘design’ or ‘rude draught’ of a play (named as *The Maid’s Tragedy* in one iteration), either in a tavern or ‘walking in the fields’, while Aubrey records that Beaumont’s ‘<maine> businesse’ within the partnership was to ‘correct the overflowings of Mr Fletchers witt’.<sup>22</sup> *The Scornful Lady* is likely to have been plotted collaboratively and written through a process of exchange, and Beaumont and Fletcher obviously had at least half an eye on earlier prodigal plays written for the boys’ companies, such as Thomas Middleton’s *A Mad World My Masters*, performed by the Children of Paul’s around 1605–6, or Lording Barry’s *Ram Alley*, performed by the Children of the King’s Revels at the Whitefriars — where *The Scornful Lady* itself appears to have been first performed — in 1607–8.

The ‘life’ of Beaumont presented in *The Scornful Lady*, then, is a life devised and completed through collaboration, an intriguing counterpart to the famous image of Beaumont and Fletcher presented by Aubrey. But it is also, of course, a fantasy life, and dramatic conventions do not pertain to real life in straightforward ways. Francis Beaumont does not appear to have been preyed upon by city usurers. One of the men who sued him at King’s Bench was Sir Edward Randill of Albury, Surrey, who had been knighted by James VI and I on 27 June 1603 at the house of Sir George Fermor at Easton Neston.<sup>23</sup> Beaumont’s other dealings were even closer to home, within the Inns of Court themselves. Edward Shorland, who sued him at King’s Bench in 1608, appears to be the Edward Shorland of Gray’s Inn who made his will on 8 May 1609, while James Riche, the man who bought his Leicestershire estates for 10 shillings, was probably the James Riche of St Clement Danes was admitted to the Inner Temple in 1588.<sup>24</sup> The financial entanglements of ‘ffrauncis Beaumont of the Inner Temple london, gentleman’ were not the result of dealings with city tradesmen or usurers, but with his social and cultural peers: gentlemen and Inns of Court men. Moreover, unlike Young Loveless, Beaumont does not appear to have gained significantly from his marriage to Ursula Isley and — unlike both of his older brothers — he was never knighted. The life of Young Loveless thus sardonically exceeds both the excesses and rewards of Beaumont’s own life. This is a fantasy in which the prodigal outdoes the usurer, and yet a fantasy that is remarkably hard-headed about the prodigal’s own capacity to exploit those near to him. Capitalizing on both its connections with Beaumont’s own life and the stubborn failure of real life to match

dramatic convention, it is a confection that might be enjoyed by students of the inns of court who knew Beaumont even if — perhaps especially if — they knew that the city usurer's real-life counterparts were also inns of court men.

If *The Scornful Lady* weaves together real life, fantasy, and dramatic convention, *The Woman Hater* plays edgier games with the dramatist's life, drawing not on Beaumont's financial entanglements but on the religious politics in which he and his family were entwined. In addition to granting Beaumont a 'good' death, Thomas Pestell — himself a somewhat pugnacious Anglican clergyman — is keen to stress his religious orthodoxy, picturing him in a battle of wits with Catholic theologians:

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  
By a clean strength of witt and judgment wert  
Well able to confound, if not convert.

This is another fantasy version of Beaumont's life, in which the dead man not only conforms to the Church of England but also disputes with Catholic radicals, not only refuting their arguments but even 'convert[ing]' them to Anglicanism. It seems unlikely that things were this simple, given the strong Catholic strains on both sides of Beaumont's family. Francis Beaumont Senior, the father of the dramatist, appears to have persecuted Catholics in the course of his work as a justice of the Common Pleas, but his wife, Anne Pierrepoint, came from a prominent Catholic family and may have been a recusant herself. Elizabeth Hastings, the mother of Francis Beaumont Senior and grandmother of Francis Beaumont Junior, battled against the recusancy laws in the 1580s, refusing to pay her fines.<sup>25</sup> Scholars have often drawn contrasts between the religious dissidence of Judge Beaumont's second son, John, who was subjected to sustained financial persecution through the recusancy laws, and the apparent orthodoxy of Francis Junior.<sup>26</sup> Finkelpearl quotes Pestell's comments as evidence that Francis conformed to the Church of England, but Roger D. Sell is more circumspect, commenting that 'Francis Beaumont's work probably does not enable us to form a definite opinion as to whether he was a Catholic at heart, and, if he was, we have no evidence that he was penalized under the recusancy laws.'<sup>27</sup> This caution may be merited, as more detailed exploration of Beaumont's family connections suggests the extent to which his religious conformity — if it was such — existed within a network of sustained Catholic connections.

Although critics have studied and debated Anne Pierrepont's own Catholicism and that of her family, they have largely overlooked her first marriage to Thomas Thorold, by whom she had two daughters, Anne and Isabel.<sup>28</sup> Here too, however, we find evidence of Catholic belief that was maintained in the face of official hostility. Francis Beaumont's half-sister Isabel, who married her cousin William Thorold, was repeatedly prosecuted for recusancy. In 1609, her goods and one third of her lands were seized by the crown, meaning that her experience of the Jacobean regime's religious policy was very similar to that of her half-brother, John.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Henry and John Beaumont both married into Catholic families, the Faunts of Foston and the Fortescues respectively, and Francis probably did the same thing when he married Ursula Isley. Ursula, Una, and Jane and William Meysey appear in a list of individuals indicted for recusancy in the West Kent Quarter Sessions in August 1606.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, in the mid-1630s Ursula Beaumont was a member of the staunchly Catholic Queen Henrietta Maria's household, serving as the Mother of the Maids and appearing, alongside her daughter Elizabeth, in Walter Montagu's pastoral *The Shepherds' Paradise*.<sup>31</sup> It is thus less easy to assume, with Pestell and others, that Francis's attitude towards religion was one of straightforward conformity.

Like our new knowledge of Beaumont's financial trials around 1608–9, this information about his religious connections both enriches and complicates our understanding of one of his plays. First performed in 1606, *The Woman Hater* was written shortly after the exposure of the Gunpowder Plot in November 1605 and the execution of the conspirators who planned to assassinate the royal family and Parliament in response to the failure of the Jacobean regime to improve conditions for Catholics. The Plot provided motivation for the increased measures against English Catholics to which Ursula Isley, John Beaumont, and Isabel Thorold all appear to have been subjected. Moreover, the Beaumonts had family ties with the conspirators via Francis Beaumont Senior's sister Elizabeth Beaumont Vaux, whose daughters, Eleanor Vaux Brokesby and Anne Vaux, were the 'Mrs Jennings' and 'Mrs Perkins' of the Plot.<sup>32</sup>

The fact that *The Woman Hater* comments on the Plot has been noted for over a century: in his 1914 study of Beaumont, Charles Mills Gayley drew attention to the Vaux connection and commented that the dramatist 'alludes with horror to the Plot itself, but holds up for ridicule the informers who swarmed the streets of London in the years succeeding, and trumped up charges of conspiracy and recusancy against unoffending persons'.<sup>33</sup> Lacking the documentary evidence later uncovered by scholars such as Mark Eccles and Roger D. Sell, Gayley puzzled over the question of whether John Beaumont was a recusant, and his uncertainty

over the extent of Francis's Catholic connections perhaps led to his failure to develop in full the implications of his own argument.<sup>34</sup> Piecing together the various connections of the Beaumonts now enables us to reassess *The Woman Hater's* religio-political valences. Performed by the Children of Paul's, a company which drew actors from the cathedral choir and performed within the cathedral precinct itself, at the heart of Anglican power structures, the play touches on the Plot in ways that have a queasily comic resonance. As Kevin A. Quarmby points out, Paul's Churchyard — only feet away from the playhouse — was the location for the execution of four of the 'lesser' conspirators, Sir Everard Digby, Robert Winter, John Grant, and Thomas Bates, on 30 January 1606.<sup>35</sup> The play's very performance location might therefore provoke vivid memories among Londoners who attended performances of *The Woman Hater* later that year, and it is on those memories of the recent past that Beaumont capitalizes.

A pair of Intelligencers haunts *The Woman Hater*, desperate to inform on their fellow-citizens. In an aside, Count Valore describes the first to appear as

a kind of Informer, one that liues in Alehouses, and Tauerns, and because hee perceiues some worthy men in this land, with much labour & great expence, to haue discouered things dangerously hanging ouer the State; hee thinks to discouer as much out of the talke of drunkards in Taphouses: hee brings me informations, pick'd out of broken wordes, in mens common talke, which with his malicious misapplication, hee hopes will seeme dangerous, hee doeth besides bring mee the names of all the young Gentlemen in the Citie, that vse Ordinaries, or Tauerns, talking (to my thinking) only as the freedom of their youth teach *them*, without any further ends; for dangerous and seditious spirits[.]<sup>36</sup>

The Intelligencer models himself on those important individuals who have discovered genuinely dangerous plots — by implication, the Gunpowder Plot itself — but he sets his sights lower, among the careless young men who haunt London's taverns and ordinaries. Rather than hearing genuinely seditious speech, he selects elements of 'common talke' and wilfully misinterprets them. The 'young Gentlemen in the Citie' are men like Young Loveless in *The Scornful Lady* or Beaumont himself, whose verse epistle to Ben Jonson, in which he laments his absence from London and, in particular, the Mermaid Tavern in Cheapside, appears — as Mark Bland has recently argued — to have been composed in late July or August 1605, shortly before *The Woman Hater* was performed by the Children of Paul's.<sup>37</sup> Young men — and especially young Catholic men — leave themselves open to danger and exploitation through their failure to guard their tongues.

As in *The Scornful Lady*, Beaumont may aim to provoke a wry smile of recognition amongst his peers in the playhouse audience, but the play's treatment of the Plot — like that of the usurer in the later play — quickly moves from the plausible to the fantastic. The Count sets the Intelligencer onto Lazarillo, a man who is obsessed by his desire to eat the head of an umbrana, a rare species of fish, and when the Intelligencer appears with a companion in act 3, scene 3, the pair overhear his conversation with the Count and — predictably — 'misapply' his comments about the umbrana. 'And thou shalt now at length obtaine thy dish', the Count tells Lazarillo, 'That noble part, the sweet head of a fish'; 'Then am I greater then the Duke', exclaims Lazarillo, happily. The Second Intelligencer, either hearing only Lazarillo's reply or ignoring the Count's words, comments, 'There, there's a notable peece of treason, greater then the Duke, marke that' (E4r). The scene spirals into further absurdity as Lazarillo outlines his plot to obtain the fish, and the Intelligencers again catch only the words that they can (mis)apply:

LAZ[ARILLO]. My Lord, what doe you thinke, if I should shaue my selfe, Put  
on midwiues apparell, come in with a hand-kercher, And beg a peece for  
a great bellied woman, or a sick child?

COUNT Good, very good.

LAZ[ARILLO] Or corrupt the waiting prentise to betray the reuersion.

I INTE[LLIGENCER]. Ther's another point in's plot, corrupt with money to  
betray: sure 'tis some Fort a meanes: marke, haue a care.

LAZ[ARILLO] And 'twere the bare vineger 'tis eaten with, it would in some sort  
satisfie nature: but might I once attaine the dish it selfe, though I cut  
out my meanes through swords and fire, through poison, through any  
thing that may make good my hopes.

2. INT[ELLIGENCER] Thankes to the gods, and our officiousnes, the plots  
discouered, fire, steele, and poison, burne the Palace, kill the Duke, and  
poison his priuie Counsell. (F1r)

The situation is both absurd and very real, as the features of the 'plot', including 'fire, steel, and poison', mirror the threats of the Gunpowder Plot against royal authority. Moreover, the fact that Lazarillo only narrowly avoids serious mishap satirically critiques the ways in which innocent, or mostly innocent, bystanders could get caught up in the febrile politics of the moment. Strikingly, the Intelligencers are most heavily censured at the play's conclusion, dismissed by the Count with the words, 'our healthful state needes no such Leeches to suck out

her bloud' (I3v); Lee Bliss draws attention to the 'sharp, topically satiric note' that this moment strikes, which 'unsettles the resolution' of both the plot surrounding Lazarillo and the play itself.<sup>38</sup> Lazarillo is genuinely — if harmlessly — aberrant in his all-consuming desire for the Umbrana's head, but it is the Intelligencers who pose the real threat to the health of the state through their misapplied treatment.

*The Woman Hater's* treatment of conspiracy and 'plot' replays certain structural features of the Gunpowder Plot and its aftermath as farce, appearing to critique both the 'innocent' people whose obsessions are open to misinterpretation and — more strongly — the unscrupulous individuals who exploit them for their own gain. Although Beaumont is careful to distinguish the behaviour of the 'worthy men in this land' who have 'with much labour & great expence ... discovered things dangerously hanging ouer the State' from that of his sleazy Intelligencers, some disconcerting parallels between their actions are allowed to subsist under the play's overtly loyal carapace. It may not be enough, *The Woman Hater* suggests, to be loyal, if your loyalty can be misconstrued and concealed from those in authority. And it is dangerous in itself to be dependent on the capacity of the ruler to interpret your fractured and misapplied words as only the product of youthful exuberance rather than 'dangerous and seditious spirits'.

Read in this way, the narrative centring on Lazarillo teeters on the edge of allegory, presenting a dystopian vision of the precarious position of Catholics in a fervid post-Plot London. Yet the play's composition history — like that of *The Scornful Lady* — complicates its interpretation. Although *The Woman Hater* is generally thought to have been written independently by Beaumont, scholars have also detected Fletcher's hand in it. Hoy thought that Fletcher had revised the play before its publication in 1607, but he may also have been involved in its original conception.<sup>39</sup> The idea of *The Woman Hater* as a collaboration draws attention to the fissures that exist in the portrait of Beaumont and Fletcher presented by Aubrey or the writers of the dedicatory poems in the 1647 folio edition of their plays, who depict the dramatists as a composite '*Beaumont-Fletcher*', whose 'fancies are so wov'n and knit, / 'Twas FRANCIS-FLETCHER, or IOHN BEAUMONT writ'.<sup>40</sup> As scholars such as Finkelpearl and Gordon McMullan have pointed out, the family backgrounds of Beaumont and Fletcher were very different: where Beaumont's family included large numbers of recusant Catholics, Fletcher's included ardent Protestants.<sup>41</sup> Fletcher's grandfather, Richard Fletcher Senior, was a priest, as was his father, Richard Fletcher Junior, who eventually rose to become bishop of London. Furthermore, John Fletcher's uncle, Giles Fletcher, was even tasked by the privy council in January and October 1591 with being one of the group of men who examined and took confessions from the seminary

priests George Beesley and Eustace Whyte, and their associates, Robert Humberston and Brian Lassy.<sup>42</sup> In the latter case the council directed that if Whyte and Lassy did not make an adequate response to questioning they were to be 'put to the manacles and soche other tortures as are vsed in Bridewell'.<sup>43</sup> Giles Fletcher was out of action as an inquisitor by 1605–6, but it is not hard to imagine an uncomfortable encounter between him and Beaumont's Vaux cousins.

Like John Earle, Thomas Pestell, John Aubrey, Thomas Fuller, or the originator of the 'plotting' anecdote, *The Scornful Lady* and *The Woman Hater* write lives for Beaumont, mixing (auto)biographical allusions with satire and fantasy. Where *The Scornful Lady* places the prodigal in a pocket utopia, *The Woman Hater* imagines 'the young Gentlemen in the Citie, that vse Ordinaries, or Tauerns' in a dystopian world of plots and misapplication. Neither play is straightforwardly biographical, yet each appears to show Beaumont and Fletcher exploiting and manipulating aspects of Beaumont's life that may well have formed part of his contemporary reputation: prodigal, crypto-Catholic, young man about the tavern. They create in the process miniature 'lives' with a theatrical energy that might run in multiple directions, resonating in varying ways within the playhouse. These playful experiments with the boundaries between the 'real' and the fictive are becoming clearer to us as we discover more about the lives of Beaumont and Fletcher, yet in neither case should this new or enlarged biographical context put a limit on interpretation. Instead, *The Scornful Lady* and *The Woman Hater* shed light on the complex ways in which the imaginations of these writers were sparked by their lived experience, the processes through which the base metal of everyday life was transmuted into theatrical gold.

## Notes

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- 1 'John Earle, Bishop of Worcester and Salisbury (1600/1–1665)', Peter Beal (ed.), *Catalogue of English Literary Manuscripts 1450–1700*, <http://www.celm-ms.org.uk/authors/earlejohn.html>.
- 2 Kate Bennett (ed.), *Brief Lives*, 2 vols (Oxford, 2015), 1.393.
- 3 Roberta Florence Brinkley (ed.), *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century* (Durham, NC, 1955), 658; Philip J. Finkelpearl, *Court and Country Politics in the Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher* (Princeton, 1990), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400860722>.
- 4 Thomas Pestell, 'An Elegie I made on Mr. Francis Beaumont, Dying 1615–16 at Westminster', Hannah Buchan (ed.), *The Poems of Thomas Pestell* (Oxford, 1940), 71–4.
- 5 *Court and Country Politics*, 41–2.
- 6 John Beaumont, 'An Epitaph Upon my Deare Brother, Francis Beaumont', *Bosworthfield: With a Taste of the Variety of Other Poems* (London, 1629: STC 1694), M2v.
- 7 Finkelpearl, *Court and Country Politics*, 42.
- 8 Bennett (ed.), *Brief Lives*, 1.393.
- 9 Sir Edward Randill v. Francis Beaumont, Court of King's Bench, 1608, The National Archives, Kew (TNA), KB 27/1408, m. 528r, KB 27/1419, m. 925r; Edward Shorland v. Francis Beaumont, Court of King's Bench, 1608, TNA, KB 27/1409, m. 184. I am very grateful to Jonathan Mackman for providing me with translations of these cases.
- 10 Indenture between Francis Beaumont and James Riche, 1609, TNA, C 54/1968, m. 40. I discovered references to this document and the King's Bench cases cited above among the papers of Charles William Wallace and Hulda Berggren Wallace at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, and traced the originals at the National Archives. In an earlier article on Beaumont co-written with Gordon McMullan, Lucia Bay, and Irene Jacobs, 'Procuring Audience', *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 January 2017, 16–17, I accidentally doubled the sum for which Beaumont sold his lands to 20 shillings.

- 11 Papers left by Francis Beaumont Senior on his death in 1598 include records of properties made over in trust for John and Francis Junior, the inheritance of the latter including premises in Swannington, Osgathorpe, and Thringston in Leicestershire. See Nottinghamshire Archives, DD/TS/6/1/16.
- 12 Lawsuits over Ursula's inheritance suggest that — unlike her sister, Una — she did not marry before she came of age; one of the suits, dating from 1623, describes her as having reached the age of twenty-one 'above a dozen years sithence' (TNA, C 2/JasI/B35/21), meaning that she was probably born around 1590 and that she and Beaumont were not married before 1611 or thereabouts.
- 13 TNA, PROB 11/94/217.
- 14 Gayley, *Beaumont*, 177; Finkelpearl, *Court and Country Politics*, 41.
- 15 The ins and outs are recorded in a series of lawsuits, including Ursula Beaumont v. Henry Yelverton and Bartholomew Beale, 1622, TNA, C 2/JasI/B37/35 (bill of complaint and answer) and C 24/502/21 (depositions); Ursula Beaumont v. Zouch Townley et al., Court of Chancery, 1623–4, TNA, C 2/JasI/B35/21 (bill of complaint and answers).
- 16 Deposition of Martin Barnham in Beaumont v. Yelverton and Beale, TNA, C 24/502/21; see also the answer of Yelverton and Beale, TNA, C 2/JasI/B37/35.
- 17 Beaumont v. Yelveton and Beale, TNA, C 2/JasI/B37/35; Beaumont v. Townley et al., TNA, C 2/JasI/B35/21.
- 18 Order of 16 June 1624, TNA, C 33/146, 1441v.
- 19 Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The Scorneful Ladie* (London, 1616; *STC* 1686).
- 20 See Baldwin Maxwell, *Studies in Beaumont, Fletcher, and Massinger* (Chapel Hill, 1939), 17–23; Martin Wiggins with Catherine Richardson, *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue*, 10 vols (Oxford, 2012–), 6.98.
- 21 Cyrus Hoy, 'Shares of Fletcher and his Collaborators in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon (III)', *Studies in Bibliography* 11 (1958), 96.
- 22 Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England* (London, 1662; Wing: F2440), 288; *Poor Robin's Jest: Or, The Compleat Jester* (London, 1667; Wing: W3075A), 31; Bennet (ed.), *Brief Lives*, 1.393. Aubrey wrote 'super' over the 'over' in 'overflowings', something that I have been unable easily to reproduce here.
- 23 See John Nichols (ed.), *The Progresses, Processions and Magnificent Festivities of King James the First*, 4 vols (London, 1828), 1.188.
- 24 See William Henry Cooke (ed.), *Students Admitted to the Inner Temple, 1571–1625* (London, 1868), 58.
- 25 See Mark Eccles, 'A Biographical Dictionary of Elizabethan Authors', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 5.3 (April 1942), 294; Roger D. Sell (ed.), *The Shorter Poems of Sir John Beaumont: A Critical Edition with an Introduction and Commentary* (Turku,

- 1974); Sell, 'Notes on the Family and Religious Background of Francis and Sir John Beaumont', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 76 (1975), 299–307; Finkelpearl, *Court and Country Politics*, 10–13.
- 26 See Eccles, 'Biographical Dictionary,' 295.
- 27 See Finkelpearl, *Court and Country Politics*, 12; Sell, 'Notes,' 299.
- 28 For the Beaumont-Thorold connection, see Pedigree of Thorold of Marston, in *Lincolnshire Pedigrees*, A.R. Maddison (ed.), 4 vols (London, 1902–6), 3.982–3.
- 29 See Charles Wilmer Foster, *A History of the Villages of Aisthorpe and Thorpe in the Fallows* (Lincoln, 1927), 142–3.
- 30 Kent History and Library Centre, Maidstone, QM/SI/1606/13/26.
- 31 See Sarah Poynting, "In the Name of all the Sisters': Henrietta Maria's Notorious Whores', in *Women and Culture at the Courts of the Stuart Queens*, ed. Clare McManus (Palgrave, 2003), 166.
- 32 See Charles Mills Gayley, *Beaumont, the Dramatist, A Portrait* (New York, 1914), 46–59; Sell, 'Notes', 305.
- 33 Gayley, *Beaumont*, 59.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 59–61.
- 35 Kevin Quarmby, *The Disguised Ruler in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Farnham, 2012), 184, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315615592>.
- 36 *The Woman Hater* (London, 1607; STC: 1693), B4r.
- 37 'Francis Beaumont's Verse Letters to Ben Jonson and "The Mermaid Club"', *English Manuscript Studies 1100–1700* 12 (2005), 139–79.
- 38 'Beaumont and Fletcher', in *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Oxford, 2002), 527, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470998922.ch36>.
- 39 See Hoy, 'Shares', 98–9.
- 40 *Comedies and Tragedies Written by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, Gentlemen* (London, 1647; Wing: B1581), A4r, B1r.
- 41 See Finkelpearl, *Court and Country Politics*; McMullan, *The Politics of Unease in the Plays of John Fletcher* (Amherst, MA, 1994), esp. 1–36.
- 42 J.R. Dasent (ed.), *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, 32 vols (London, 1890–1907), 20. 204, 22.39–40. See Lloyd E. Berry (ed.), *The English Works of Giles Fletcher, the Elder* (Madison, WI, 1964), 31–2.
- 43 Dasent (ed.), *Acts*, 22.39–40.