

## Issues in Review

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### **Beaumont400**

#### **Introduction: Beaumont400**

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*This introduction outlines the essays in the Early Theatre Issues in Review forum 'Beaumont400', placing them in the context of the four hundredth anniversary of Francis Beaumont's death, the performance of his plays in the early twenty-first century, and current developments in scholarship on Beaumont and Fletcher's works.*

Francis Beaumont died on 6 March 1616 and was buried three days later in Westminster Abbey. Unlike Shakespeare — himself buried in far-off Stratford-upon-Avon — Beaumont has no statue or monument in the abbey. Instead, he is commemorated only by an inscription with his name and date of death, which were added in the nineteenth century to a slab marking the grave of Abraham Cowley, along with the names of other poets such as Geoffrey Chaucer, John Denham, and John Dryden. Beaumont is thus overshadowed by Shakespeare, just as the four hundredth anniversary of his death in 2016 was largely overshadowed by Shakespeare400. Yet the anniversary of Beaumont's death provides us with an opportunity to think in detail about his contribution to what is still often known as the 'Beaumont and Fletcher' canon, despite the contribution of others — notably Philip Massinger — to that oeuvre. The anniversary also prompts us to look again at what we know of the details of Beaumont's life and its relationship to his works. This 'Issues in Review' segment features essays that explore Beaumont's work through a set of overlapping critical frameworks: biography; the cultural

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contexts of early modern London; reception studies; histories of the book; and performance studies.

The first essay, 'Beaumont's Lives', revisits the relationship between Beaumont's life and his works, drawing on new biographical material that opens up fresh ways of reading *The Scornful Lady* and *The Woman Hater* by encouraging us to review our ideas about Beaumont's financial and religious status. In the process, this essay looks again at Beaumont's relationship with institutions such as the inns of court and the Church of England. A similar desire to look afresh at Beaumont's interactions with the structuring authorities of Jacobean England animates Tracey Hill's essay, "'The Grocers Honour': or, Taking the City Seriously in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*", which explores this play's 'complex engagement with the early Jacobean citizen class' and its mediation between civic and theatrical institutions. Hill draws on an annotated copy of *The Knight* in the British Library's collection, inscribed with the intriguing note 'Oh how ye ofended Cittizens did nestle / to be abused with *knight* of burning pestle' and in 'Reading Performance; Reading Gender: Early Encounters with Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Scornful Lady* in Print', Simon Smith draws in greater detail on recent approaches to the history of the book and readerly annotation, exploring the ways in which Beaumont and Fletcher's hugely popular collaboration *The Scornful Lady*, first performed at Whitefriars around 1610, was received by its earliest readers. In these annotations, Smith argues, 'questions of female identity appear intimately entwined with those of performativity'. The final essay in this cluster explores the question of performance from a different angle. Eoin Price's 'The Future Francis Beaumont' looks at performances of his plays in 2016 and the years leading up to this anniversary year, in addition to exploring their place within the early modern theatrical canon. 'What', Price asks, 'does the recent performance and reception history of Beaumont tell us about his potential future?'

These essays have their origins in 'Beaumont400', a celebration of Beaumont's work and achievements at King's College London and the Guildhall Library on 11–12 March 2016. This event took the form of a symposium, a walking tour of 'Beaumont's London' led by Tracey Hill, and a performance of his first play, *The Woman Hater*, by Edward's Boys.<sup>1</sup> Hill's and Smith's essays here were presented in earlier forms at the symposium; the remaining essays have been freshly written but draw on debates at that event and on archival discoveries made during the anniversary year. 'Beaumont400' was among only a few events to mark the anniversary of Beaumont's death, along with staged readings in Globe Education's 'Read Not Dead' series of *The Scornful Lady* at Gray's Inn on 23 October and *The Coxcomb* at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse on 13 November. All — ironically — were

promoted under the banner of the Shakespeare400 programme curated by the London Shakespeare Centre at King's College London, in which Shakespeare's Globe was a partner. Calling the event 'Beaumont400' and rebranding its host institution the 'London Beaumont Centre' for the day were therefore ways of both parodying the potential excesses of 'Shakespeare400' and critiquing the comparative lack of interest that Beaumont's anniversary provoked.

This lack of interest would, of course, have surprised Beaumont's contemporaries, whose high opinion of his works is clear in their decision to bury him in Westminster Abbey and in the elegies that accompanied his death. In one of these elegies, John Earle positions his reader by Beaumont's grave at the abbey, lamenting the fact that there is not '[a] *Muse like his to sigh upon his grave*', Beaumont's own elegies on Lady Markham and others having daunted his own would-be elegists: '*We dare not write thy Elegie, whilst each feares / He nere shall match that copy of thy teares*'.<sup>2</sup> Having argued — somewhat strenuously — for the purity and chastity of Beaumont's works, and having taken detours first through the playhouse to criticize those dramatists who might presume to follow him and then through the page of the printed book to attack the 'scurrill Wits and Buffons' of classical drama, the elegy's closing lines return to the abbey:

But those their owne Times were content t' allow  
A thirsty fame, and thine is lowest now.  
But thou shalt live, and when thy Name is growne  
Six Ages older, shall be better knowne,  
When th' art of *Chaucers* standing in the Tombe,  
Thou shalt not share, but take up all his roome. (c4r)

Earle imagines literary fame as a multitemporal contest in which Beaumont does battle with Plautus and Aristophanes on one side and Chaucer on the other; in these final lines the temporal struggle evolves into a physical and spatial tussle, as Beaumont's imagined monument crowds out that of Chaucer.

If the anniversary year of 2016 provided us with an opportunity to think about Beaumont's life and its commemoration, it should also provoke us to consider his afterlives in the early twenty-first century. As Price points out, Beaumont's theatrical stock is perhaps higher than it has been at any point since the mid eighteenth century, the joyous festive riot of Adele Thomas's 2014 production of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse having put to rest the lingering preconception that this play is impossible to stage. Other professional productions in recent years include Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster* (2012) and *The Maid's Tragedy* (2014) at the American Shakespeare Centre's Blackfriars

Playhouse in Staunton, Virginia, as part of the experimental 'Actors' Renaissance Season', in which actors work without directors, and *The Maid's Tragedy* (2016) and *A King and No King* (2017) by Brave Spirits theatre company in Washington, DC. Beaumont has also been well represented by amateur groups and in staged readings. *The Woman Hater* was produced by Edward's Boys under Perry Mills's direction at King's College London and other venues in 2016, and the Education Department at Shakespeare's Globe have mounted staged readings of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, co-ordinated by Frances Marshall (2013), and *The Scornful Lady*, co-ordinated by James Wallace, and *The Coxcomb*, co-ordinated by Nick Hutchison (both 2016).<sup>3</sup>

*The Woman Hater* and *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* are, of course, the two plays with the strongest claims to having been authored mainly or solely by Beaumont, and they present a set of interconnected opportunities and challenges for scholars and theatre-makers.<sup>4</sup> Thomas's production of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* exploited its location in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, using Jacobean-style costumes and music to create a world elsewhere, but also using George, the Citizen-Grocer (Phil Daniels), and his wife, Nell (Pauline McLynn), as a bridge between actor and audience, past and present, through their frequent movement into the pit and their interaction with the spectators seated there. In contrast, Marshall's staged reading of *The Knight* used eclectic, mainly modern-day costumes, casting George (Matt Adis) and Nell (Rebecca Todd) as amiable nouveau riches in flashy suit and glittery frock, taking selfies with the cast and munching snacks. Modern dress enabled Marshall to cast the Prologue (Martin Hodgson) as a stand-in co-ordinator of the production, a whirl of frustrated energy as he corralled actors, gathered props, reluctantly took on the role of Pompiona, and engaged in a sustained battle of wills with George and, especially, Nell. Much of the Prologue's hostility centred on the consumption and circulation of food in the Sackler Studios, where the reading was performed; as Peter Kirwan describes, in one improvised sequence, 'the Wife sent a bag of chocolates rustling loudly down the rows of the audience. In high dudgeon, the Prologue came and removed the bag, prompting a stand-off as the Wife took to her feet and quietly told him to give them back. The audience delightedly persisted in rustling the bag as loudly as possible for the remainder of the scene'.<sup>5</sup> The production thus pulled *The Knight* into the present moment of its performance, encouraging spectators to enjoy its self-conscious play with theatrical convention within the relaxed and improvisatory framework of the staged reading.

Mills's production of *The Woman Hater* was more complex still in its temporal interactions. Edward's Boys are a company composed of pupils from the

King Edward VI School, aged between around twelve and eighteen, and their productions are in some respects the closest that modern playgoers may ever get to seeing a highly trained boys' company of the early seventeenth century. Yet they have generally eschewed period costume, and *The Woman Hater* was no exception, being set in 1950s Milan, complete, as Gordon McMullan puts it, 'with snappy suits, priests, paparazzi and women of style finding their way in a male-dominated society, something that is neatly underlined by the production's opening tune, "The Lady is a Tramp"'.<sup>6</sup> Within this milieu, the dual plotlines of the play — one focusing on the anti-social misogyny of Gondarino (Daniel Wilkinson), the titular 'woman hater', and his interactions with the bold and witty Oriana (Jack Hawkins), the other on the outrageous desire of the voluptuous Lazarillo (Daniel Power) to consume a rare fish, the umbrana — intersected nearly with British cultural stereotypes about both Italy and the 1950s. Thus, the production simultaneously brought to the fore the play's potent combination of gender politics, political manoeuvring and gourmandizing desires — all highlighted by the chosen historical and cultural setting — and its self-conscious negotiation with the theatrical conventions of the past.

In a penetrating recent account of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* and its relationships with its audiences, provocatively titled 'Beaumont our Contemporary', Jeremy Lopez notes that criticism of the play often concerns itself with 'a question of historical, demographic difference: who went to which theaters, who liked what kinds of plays?' 'But', he writes, 'the answer to this question always reinscribes a larger distinction between two imaginary forms of dramaturgy — one trans-historical, popular, "Shakespearean," and the other historically circumscribed, elitist, and "non-Shakespearean"'.<sup>7</sup> These questions and distinctions pertain both to theatrical and critical approaches to Beaumont's work. Staging early modern plays is always in part an act of historical imagination: every revival performs a kind of 'what if?' experiment, in which a play's outmoded linguistic and narrative structures prompt spectators to consider whether this play can stake a claim to our attention in the present moment. When the chosen play is by Beaumont and not by Shakespeare, whose place in contemporary theatrical culture is still far more assured, we are also invited to ponder what our theatrical landscape might look like if Beaumont's plays were the dominant ones, and not Shakespeare's.

The remaining essays in this 'Issues in Review' forum encourage us to perform the same manoeuvre critically: to ask not only what contextual analysis, book and reception history, and performance studies might do for Beaumont, but what Beaumont might do for our understanding of these approaches. Price's essay not only draws attention to productive demands that Beaumont's plays make on

twenty-first theatre-makers, but also suggests the potential gains that might be made by bringing contemporary performances into dialogue with the plays' early modern stage histories and establishing a viable history for Beaumont in performance. Moreover, the early modern performance of Beaumont and Fletcher's plays encompasses a wider range of theatrical modes and locations than those of Shakespeare, covering not only professional and amateur performance, but also child and adult companies; the inns of court; the royal court; several records of surreptitious performances during the civil wars; and almost every playhouse in seventeenth-century London.

My own exploration of Beaumont's religious background and the legal entanglements in which he became entwined, in the essay entitled 'Beaumont's Lives', similarly points to the gains that might be made by re-centring our study of early modern drama. Previous studies of Beaumont have drawn on early modern biographies of the writer such as those of Thomas Pestell and John Aubrey, or on our knowledge of Beaumont's family and patronage networks.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Shakespearean biographies have often looked to the dramatist's life to explain the emotional heft of plays such as *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night*; Stephen Greenblatt, for example, writes that 'the death of his son and the impending death of his father — a crisis of mourning and memory — constitute a psychic disturbance that may help to explain the explosive power and inwardness of *Hamlet*'.<sup>9</sup> This essay offers a third approach, exploring the ways in which Beaumont and Fletcher blur the boundaries between real-life experience and fictional representation. The miniature 'lives' of Beaumont presented in *The Scornful Lady* and *The Woman Hater* mediate playfully between (auto)biography and convention, perhaps suggesting links between drama and the satires and lyrics of poets such as John Marston and John Donne.

A different form of contextualization appears in Hill's essay. *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* remains one of the period's most intriguing examples of a play's failure to please its initial spectators, and attempting to account for it has led generations of scholars into productive explorations of audience response, theatrical politics, and the social structures of early modern London.<sup>10</sup> Hill breaks new ground, however, in reminding us of the insistent connections between the professional and civic stages, and the extent to which dramatists necessarily worked with one eye on the city. 'Rather than positing a hostile polarity between the play's civic and theatrical dimensions', she argues, 'perhaps Beaumont's most radical experimentation was actually in the way he *conflated* these ... *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* sits at the centre of an intricate series of mutually beneficial relationships'.

It matters, as Smith reminds us, that *The Scornful Lady* appears to have been overwhelmingly popular on stage and in print, and that copies of this play are annotated in ways that present both interrogations of gender identity and its representation and performance-orientated modes of reading. As such, this essay complements Claire M.L. Bourne's recent account of the bespoke title-pages of quarto editions of Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* (1619), *A King and No King* (1619), and *Philaster* (1620), which, she argues, 'are indicative of a publishing strategy aimed at adapting into print a new kind of suspenseful, plot-driven drama that seventeenth-century commentators strongly associated with Beaumont and Fletcher's collaborative dramaturgy and with these three plays in particular'.<sup>11</sup> Like Bourne, Smith brings together book history and formal analysis, pushing these approaches into areas that they cannot touch solely through the study of Shakespearean books.

As the comparative lack of fanfare for Beaumont400 suggests, John Earle may have been over-optimistic in his claim that Beaumont would see off Plautus and Aristophanes, and eventually oust Chaucer from his central position in the history of English literature. Beaumont has often flown under the critical and theatrical radar, and the performance and scholarship on his plays has seen a number of false starts and promising beginnings that did not develop into sustained traditions. As Jeffrey Masten argues in his landmark book *Textual Intercourse*, published twenty years ago, the collaboration of Beaumont and Fletcher is one of the period's most potent reminders both that 'two heads are different than one' and that questions of authorship should not be divided from those of sexuality.<sup>12</sup> For a brief period in the 1980s and 90s, the works of Beaumont and Fletcher were prominent in both areas of scholarship. Masten and Gordon McMullan sought to bring together textuality and sexuality, while feminism, gender studies, and queer theory shaped the approaches of Kathleen McLuskie, Jonathan Dollimore, Nicholas F. Radel, Mario DiGangi, and others.<sup>13</sup> Surprisingly, given this established tradition, Beaumont and Fletcher have been less prominent in recent efforts to bring queer theory into dialogue with the early modern, notwithstanding the valuable recent work of scholars such as James M. Bromley and Valerie Billing.<sup>14</sup> The essays in this 'Issues in Review' section thus suggest just some of the paths that future criticism might explore, while the impact of Beaumont's plays in their recent performances — with a range of reviews, tweets, and other responses effectively 'archiving' these productions online — argues for the theatrical vitality of his works. Beaumont's 'lives' — textual, critical, theatrical, and biographical — continue to pose new questions and offer fresh insights.

## Notes

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- 1 I would like to thank the other speakers at this event, Suzanne Gossett, Sarah Dusta-geer, Kate Graham, Lois Potter, Adele Thomas, and Jackie Watson, as well as the director of *The Woman Hater*, Perry Mills.
- 2 Francis Beaumont, John Fletcher, *et al.*, *Comedies and Tragedies Written by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher Gentlemen* (London, 1647), c3v. Italics in the original.
- 3 For further details on these and other productions see Eoin Price's essay in this cluster; useful lists of earlier professional and university productions — including, for instance, a production of *The Woman Hater* at Cornell University in 2002 — can be found in the appendices (by Karin Brown and Jeremy Lopez) to Pascale Aebischer and Kathryn Prince (eds), *Performing Early Modern Drama Today* (Cambridge, 2012), 178–227, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139047975>.
- 4 On the authorship of *The Woman Hater* see Cyrus Hoy, 'Shares of Fletcher and his Collaborators in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon (III)', *Studies in Bibliography* 11 (1958), 86–107, and discussions in the essays by Munro and Price in this cluster.
- 5 Peter Kirwan, 'The Knight of the Burning Pestle (Read not Dead) @ Sackler Studios, Shakespeare's Globe', *The Bardathon*, <http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2013/02/20/the-knight-of-the-burning-pestle-read-not-dead-sackler-studios-shakespeares-globe/>.
- 6 Gordon McMullan, 'Review: *The Woman Hater*', *Edward's Boys* website, <http://www.edwardsboys.org/reviews-and-feedback/review-the-woman-hater/>. Harry R. McCarthy offers another detailed and insightful review: '*The Woman Hater* Presented by Edward's Boys', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 34 (2016), 719–23, <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.2016.0063>.
- 7 Jeremy Lopez, *Constructing the Canon of Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge, 2014), 75.
- 8 See, for example, the very different uses of biography in Charles Mills Gayley, *Beaumont, the Dramatist, A Portrait* (New York, 1914); Philip J. Finkelpearl, *Court and Country Politics in the Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher* (Princeton, 1990), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400860722>; Gordon McMullan, *The Politics of Unease in the Plays of John Fletcher* (Amherst, MA, 1994); and Jeffrey Masten, *Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge, 1997).
- 9 Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York, 2004), 318.
- 10 For some recent contributions to this debate, see Joshua S. Smith, 'Reading Between the Acts: Satire and the Interludes in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*', *Studies in*



- Philology* 109 (2012), 474–95, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sip.2012.0027>; Bret E. Whitted, ‘Staging Exchange: Why *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* Flopped at Blackfriars in 1607’, *Early Theatre* 15.2 (2012), 111–30, <https://doi.org/10.12745/et.15.2.912>; Robert Zacharias, ‘Rafe’s Rebellion: Reconsidering *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*’, *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* 31 (2008), 103–26; Lopez, *Constructing*, 74–8.
- 11 Claire M.L. Bourne, ‘“High Designe”: Beaumont and Fletcher Illustrated’, *English Literary Renaissance* 44 (2014), 276–7, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6757.12029>.
- 12 Masten, *Textual Intercourse*, 19.
- 13 See, for example, Masten, *Textual Intercourse*; McMullan, *Politics of Unease*; Masten, ‘My Two Dads: Collaboration and the Reproduction of Beaumont and Fletcher’, in Jonathan Goldberg (ed.), *Queering the Renaissance* (Durham, NC, 1993), 289–309, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822382607-014>; Jonathan Dollimore, ‘Subjectivity, Sexuality, and Transgression: The Jacobean Connection’, *Renaissance Drama* 17 (1986), 53–81, <https://doi.org/10.1086/rd.17.41917213>; Kathleen E. McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists* (Hemel Hempstead, 1989); Nicholas F. Radel, ‘Fletcherian Tragicomedy, Cross-Dressing and the Constriction of Homoerotic Desire’, *Renaissance Drama* 26 (1995), 53–82, <https://doi.org/10.1086/rd.26.41917318>; Mario DiGangi, *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge, 1997), esp. 134–61, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511585319>.
- 14 See James Bromley, *Intimacy and Sexuality in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 2011), esp. 81–91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139057752>; Valerie Billing, ‘Female Spectators and the Erotics of the Diminutive in *Epicoene* and *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*’, *Renaissance Drama* 42 (2014), 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.1086/674680>. I am very grateful to Kate Graham for discussion of these issues and for the paper that she delivered as part of Beaumont400: “[N]or bear I in this breast / So much cold spirit to be called a woman”: The Queerness of Female Revenge in *The Maid’s Tragedy*’.

