

RECONCILING PRAGMATISM AND LITERARY THEORY: BEAUMONT AND  
FLETCHER'S *THE MAID'S TRAGEDY* AND ITS ETHICS PRAGMATICALLY  
CONSIDERED

A Thesis by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Francis Connor, Committee Chair

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## DEDICATION

To the accomplished and amicable Drs. Francis Connor and Christopher Brooks, whose creative intellect, dedication to scholarship, and sanguine spirit inspire me, and especially to Kiah Baxter-Ferguson, whose love and support makes this project possible

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On the personal side I would like to thank my grandmother, Janice Johnson, and especially my girlfriend, Kiah Baxter-Ferguson, for the love and support that has sustained me over my graduate career. Without them it seems likely that most everything that I have experienced would come to quite little.

I must also acknowledge a great debt to the pragmatist theorist Dr. Richard Shusterman, whose work has provided a great deal of the philosophical backing for my thought and research.

## ABSTRACT

Seeking to find a way forward for literary theory in the face of the slow dissolution of the postmodern era, this research project draws from the philosophy of pragmatism and investigates a play with the purpose of revitalizing confidence in our abilities as critics for obtaining a truer understanding, a greater appreciation, and a heightened enjoyment of literary works. It argues that the merits of pragmatism warrant a positive readjustment of our attitudes towards commonsense ideas of reason, truth, history, biography, interpretation, and authorship – away from the Cartesian method of incessant skepticism and universal doubt that so creatively motivated postmodern thinkers, and towards a coherentist, instrumentalist, meliorative, and fallibilist strategy which properly acknowledges the limits of our subjectivity and the accomplishments of postmodern efforts without pessimistically abandoning all belief in the veracity and value of our literary experiences, in all their aesthetic, linguistic, genetic, historic, and cultural complexity. Accomplishing this goal requires a successful demonstration of method, which I attempt to realize, as far as is possible in a single presentation, by accurately identifying, through research into the philosophical and cultural history of ethical thought, a central thematic meaning and possible authorial motivation in Beaumont and Fletcher's drama *The Maid's Tragedy*.

## PREFACE

If the prospect of writing can intimidate, surely the task of writing a thesis threatens to overwhelm; as a work that carries unique personal and communal import, it must at one and the same time reify and advance a coherent philosophy, bringing the efforts of colleagues past and present into fresh territories, and envisage, if faintly, the contours of the future life as scholar, theorist, or critic to which its author aspires. As an artistic act, it also must grow of a piece with their vision of the good life. In my case, this means that my project aims to be optimistically oriented, cognitively convincing, practically engaging, and aesthetically whole. To help accomplish this, I have split my project into two interrelated parts – the theoretical along with a first step towards its practical demonstration – which illustrate the balanced approach necessary to literary study as an act congruous with *eudaimonia*, and finds its fulcrum in a single dramatic artwork particularly open to classical ideas: Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*.

The project grounds itself in pragmatist philosophy, which acknowledges postmodern challenges to traditional thought, especially by intellectuals like Nietzsche and the post-structuralists, but ultimately rejects their often radically skeptical tendencies by finding an alternative to the misguided modern quest for certainty to which they so colorfully objected. It aims to develop the budding movement in pragmatist aesthetics towards literary realms, drawing primarily on the influential work of Richard Shusterman, but also harkening back to one of the movement's early twentieth century forebears, William James. If successful, my treatments of literary theory and *The Maid's Tragedy* will not only help expand our understanding of the play, but testify to the potential which I believe pragmatism offers everyone within the field of literary studies.

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## CHAPTER I

### PRAGMATISM ADDRESSES THE POSTMODERN

Our many unflagging debates in literary theory and philosophy from the past century eventually came into focus as conflicts between “modernity,” roughly defined as the quest for universal human progress via the Enlightenment ideas of reason and liberal ethics embarked upon most ardently by the Anglo-American (or analytic) tradition, and “post-modernity,” a movement of critique springing largely from continental philosophy and characterized by deep skepticism or rejection of modernist ethics (Nietzsche), history (Foucault), economics and politics (Marx), psychology (Freud and Lacan), gender (Kristeva and Butler), identity (Deleuze and Guattari), and language and meaning (Derrida); in short, almost all of early modern Western philosophical thought. In hermeneutic and literary studies, these and other thinkers profoundly altered popular methodologies and theories, throwing a deep shadow of doubt on many concepts once considered manifest, as diverse as meaning, authorship, intentionality, and reason itself.<sup>1</sup>

However, postmodernism's attacks, though often powerful and in many cases efficacious, aimed

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<sup>1</sup>For examples from Nietzsche, see: “Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize with a Hammer” (*The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*. Aaron Ridley, Judith Norman, eds. Judith Norman, tran. Cambridge: CUP, 2010:153-231) and *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (Rolf-Peter Horstmann, ed. Judith Norman, tran. Cambridge: CUP, 2002);

For Foucault: *Madness and Civilization* (Richard Howard, tran. London: Routledge, 2009), *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Alan Sheridan, tran. London: Routledge, 2007) and *Discipline and Punish* (Alan Sheridan, tran. London: Allen Lane, 1977);

Marx: *Capital* (Friedrich Engels, coauthor. Edward B. Eveling, ed. Samuel Moore, tran. NY: International Publishers, 1974);

Freud: *The Interpretation of Dreams* (NY: Modern Library, 1950);

Lacan: His *Seminars*, divided into books, only some of which are available in English through W. W. Norton, the remainder in French through Paris: Éditions du Seuil, and *Écrits* (Hélène Fink, ed. Bruce Fink, trans. NY: Norton, 2006).

Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (NY: CUP, 1980);

Butler, *Gender Trouble* (NY: Routledge, 2015);

Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (NY CUP, 1994), and, with Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis: UMP, 1983) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: UMP, 1987);

Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: UCP, 1978), *Speech and Phenomena* (Evanston: NUP, 1973), and *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: JHUP, 1976).

at a narrower target than many have imagined.<sup>2</sup>

Western epistemology in the modern period, influenced by Aristotle and especially Descartes, might well be described as *foundationalist*.<sup>3</sup> It had sought to build the superstructure of philosophic thought on the bedrock of some few immutable truths. When properly constructed by correct logic, it was supposed to receive apodictic status from this foundation. But postmodern sallies, as well as the “unflinching self-criticism” of analysis itself, succeeded in undermining the intelligibility of these autarkic foundations (Shusterman, *Aesthetics*, 4). The search for stability then found linguistics, a turn which ushered structuralism into literary circles. It too was then thwarted by post-structuralists and deconstruction. Foundationalism's influences in literary theory, felt directly or indirectly in the popular currents of formalism, structuralism, and intentionalism, diminished greatly. Fresh critical approaches as diverse as critical theory, post-colonialism, ethnic studies, gender studies, feminism, queer theory, cultural studies, and varieties of historicisms have now blossomed and matured in the intellectual soil cleared and enriched by the tilling under of modernism.

Notwithstanding such welcome proliferation, we find ourselves left with some uneasiness. Richard Shusterman, a philosopher of aesthetics with a background in both analytic and Marxist approaches, has astutely remarked that the “demand for interpretation ... may be even more crucial than truth to the critical profession” because “the production of ever new interpretations and critical perspectives is necessary for its own reproduction and advancement” (85). He believes that “such pressures can explain why recent academic criticism has so

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<sup>2</sup>While postmodernism and post-structuralism arose independently, with time the “postmodern” has come to be associated more and more with post-structuralists, deconstructivists, and even critical theorists. I refer to all three as “postmodern” both for the sake of convenience and to reflect this convergence, which can partially be attributed to their shared, antifoundational premises, as well as to the usage of writers like Shusterman and Habermas.

<sup>3</sup>See Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* (I.3:5-23) and Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, especially his famous argument in 1.7, “cogito ergo sum.”

enthusiastically embraced ... the banishment of the author ... and then, the further banishment of the circumscribed, determinate work,” and cites E. D. Hirsch as but one prominent critic who fears from this development the loss of criticism “as a scholarly cognitive discipline converging on the truth” (85). Perhaps what Stanley Fish thirty years ago called “theory fear” has never been truly assuaged (*Consequences*, 439). If this isn't enough to worry us, Shusterman goes on to clarify his critique and exposes an intriguing problem: under his lights, postmodernists have become intoxicated by their perceived victory over foundationalism and often fail to see beyond the old battle-lines. While they “are right to reject ... foundational understanding,” they are “wrong to conclude from this that all understanding is interpretation” and “[betray] an unseemly bond to the foundationalist framework, in the assumption that what is not foundational must be interpretive” (120). Even if the poststructuralists are right, and we cannot locate a foundation to language or meaning (“the center cannot hold”), we are not left with nothing. The idea that either everything is lost in linguistic free play or pinned down by the gravity of rational truths is precisely the false dilemma that foundationalism itself constructed by designating interpretation “*the* form of non-foundational understanding” (120). Many postmodernists may be nonplussed to find another foe waiting, overlooked during their struggles against foundationalism, that does not wear the modernist armor – it does not suffer many of its vulnerabilities and cannot be profitably assailed by the same strategies. This contender lied dormant for a considerable period after its initial organization at the close of the nineteenth century, wherein it was first given the name pragmatism.

I will not give a full genealogy of pragmatism, nor its more modern incarnations, but rather look to its potential for energizing literary theory and criticism, and then attempt to demonstrate its usefulness in my own handling of a literary work. Richard Shusterman, Wojciech

Małecki, and Leszek Drogoszewski have inspired me in this approach. Contemporary pragmatists must also deal consciously with the uproar that some neopragmatists, such as Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, caused in the nineteen-eighties with strident “anti-theory” arguments.<sup>4</sup> It is enough here to say that their contributions, while sometimes illuminating, are met with serious challenges from both within and without pragmatist circles. I will maintain that pragmatism is attractive, when properly conceived, despite these missteps or the reported distaste for pragmatism more generally (See Małecki, *Nostalgia*, 269, or Lentricchia 28-30 for but two examples). Many working in literature departments arrive there because of the powerful experiences that literary works induce, and it is my claim that imperious skeptical attitudes are inimical to explaining, developing, expanding, originating, or improving those experiences. Much like a deep skepticism of the existence of other minds may forever stand untouched by ratiocination or the protestations of others yet yield little or even negative returns when leveraged in our actual lives, the impervious skepticism often exhibited by poststructuralism and deconstruction, if left unchecked, endangers not only the humanist project, but our hopes for bettering our lives and our society. Their challenges must not go unconsidered or undervalued – skepticism, after all, is the leaven of the intellect – but may ultimately be left in theoretical purgatory, unanswered; just as in the face of any enigma, we work with what we have, and should aim to increase our stores rather than allowing them to dwindle through despondency. I will call upon Shusterman and William James to elucidate the unique attraction that pragmatism can have for literary theory *per se*.

To begin with, pragmatism can earnestly join other antifoundationalist movements in their critiques of modernist rationality, yet does not overcompensate in the skeptical direction as

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<sup>4</sup>Knapp, Steven and Michaels, W. B., “Against Theory.” *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*. ed. Mitchell, W J. T. Chicago: UCP, 1985:11-31. Print.

the postmodern often do, rescuing timeworn notions of reason, consistency, and meaning from the conceptual grave, even if indelibly altered. How does it accomplish this? Shusterman's suggestion, that antifoundationalism does not of necessity lead to universal hermeneuticism, has already hinted at one way – the demolition of foundationalist epistemology does not leave us with only the recalcitrant blindness of skepticism. Rather, *coherentism* emerges as another epistemological procedure. In place of the search for a set of unquestionable foundations, which would be found “in self-evident first principles, primal essences, necessary categories, and privileged, primary certainties,” coherentism imagines the body of human knowledge as a web, each strand held up by the strength of those around it, and this picture allows for the examination of every section, with recalibrations gradually affecting the entirety of the web (Shusterman, *Life*, 157). In place of supporting a linear progression of epistemic justification, where the justification of any individual belief can be traced back to another, until ultimately on some inviolate, ground belief, coherentism advances the idea that it is total systems of belief that are justified, not individual beliefs. Otto Neurath, though speaking on scientific knowledge, offered perhaps the most famous metaphor that elucidates the notion: “[we] are like sailors who must reconstruct their ship on the open sea.... Where a beam is taken away a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the ship is used as support.... [T]he ship can be shaped entirely anew, but only by gradual reconstruction” (qtd. in Neurath, 191). James gives a similar account of how we amend our belief structures, even when facing the most novel or revolutionary ideas:

The observable process... is the familiar one by which any individual settles into *new opinions*.... The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to strain.... He seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of it as he can.... It preserves the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification, stretching them just enough to make them admit the novelty, but conceiving that in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible. (James, *Pragmatism*, 23-24)

Justification for our beliefs under the coherentist conception relies on the coherence of the total picture of those beliefs, and for the pragmatist, their harmony with all of our experiences in the world, both abstract and concrete (James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 206-212). Challenges to the picture, from any kind of doubt, impose edits partially and gradually, as they must to allow for the internal demands of psychology and the external exigencies of continual, practical living. James' theory of our accumulation of knowledge, this coherentism, contingent as it is upon the locality of our own individual "pile" to be augmented, is congruent with Heidegger and Gadamer's hermeneutics and the elimination of the absolute that it effects, which in turn agrees with Nietzsche's perspectivism (Kremer 71).

Pragmatists then, if coherentists, can assent to skeptical claims that something we believe is uncertain without abandoning the overall structure of belief supplied them by experience and reason. The burden of proof falls back on the skeptic to provide a coherent substitution for what they want to deconstruct (if they propose annihilation of a strand, the web must be receptive to a new, coherent reconstitution). Our stance shifts towards the positive, and we no longer require deep justification for every one of our common-sense beliefs. Only when one is challenged successfully, and a workable method of its removal and replacement with a superior adumbrated, will the coherentist relinquish it. Denials of a final ground for meaning in language, for example, do not deter the pragmatist; she notes that everyone makes use of it continuously all the same, its signs bearing truth, as James would say, "*just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience*" (*Pragmatism*, 23). From a perspective outside the speaker, elevating the transcendental signified, hidden in the mind, over its most apposite, revealed meaning confounds proper evaluation. The received signification, if satisfactory in experience, deserves the higher appraisal, while the hidden holds value only proportional to the

potential its investigation has to improve that experience; the principal value of a recipe is in its execution, no matter what the chef intended when she invented it, and grasping after that phantasm will be worth our efforts only if it improves the product.<sup>5</sup> Whatever she had on her mind will be quite forgotten when the food arrives.

Undoubtedly, a shift from foundational to coherentist epistemology or from an essential to an instrumental understanding of truth will rarely convince true skeptics – pragmatists are under no illusions on this point. Persistence in skepticism is always an option.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the pragmatist movement does not set out to prove anything to the skeptically inclined. Rather, it seeks to persuade by opening up a more attractive avenue to anti-foundationalist critics and inviting them into the optimistic arms of a melioristic humanism. We would bring into literary studies Peirce's plea for sincerity: "Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts" (140).

Pragmatism aligns with postmodern insights while at the same time retaining due respect for basic rationality in other crucial ways beyond coherentism. These ways relate to its epistemology and each other through its holism. For the pragmatists, as for many postmodernists influenced by continental phenomenologists like Heidegger, the stuff of life comes to us whole, so that categories and distinctions, as well as they serve, do not actually sunder, for instance, the body from the mind, the ethical from the aesthetic, or the subject and the object in our thought.

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<sup>5</sup>James refers to this as "essential truth," and opposes what he sees as its overestimation: "*Essential* truth, the truth of the intellectualists, ... is like the coat that fits tho no one has ever tried it on, like the music that no ear has listened to. It is less real, not more real, than the verified article; and to attribute a superior degree of glory to it seems little more than a piece of perverse abstraction-worship" (James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 205).

<sup>6</sup>James revealingly describes the unassailable position of the skeptic: "General scepticism is the live mental attitude of refusing to conclude. It is a permanent torpor of the will, renewing itself in detail towards each successive thesis that offers, and you can no more kill it off by logic than you can kill off obstinacy or practical joking. This is why it is so irritating. Your consistent sceptic never puts his scepticism into a formal proposition, – he simply chooses it as a habit. He provokingly hangs back when he might so easily join us in saying yes, but he is not illogical or stupid, – on the contrary, he often impresses us by his intellectual superiority. This is the *real* scepticism that rationalists have to meet, and their logic does not even touch it" (James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 198-199).

In James' instrumental theory of truth, Shusterman's philosophical "life-practice," and Dewey's "live creature" we hear variations on Heidegger's *dasein*, "being-in-the-world." Each in their author's way, they emphasize certain pieces of the phenomenological stream of human experience. It was the immediacy and inextricability of our experience which motivated Dewey's objection to skepticism. "We are linked," he writes,

to the world in a primal way before the question of knowledge-claims can even arise.... [E]ven the formulation of sceptical doubts presupposes a behavioral background and use of world materials, organs, and language. There can be no total, unbridgeable gulf between subject and object (or mind and world), for both are only constituted as distinct terms through experiential interaction. (qtd. in Shusterman, *Life* 161)

Pragmatism, according to Shusterman, enacts "Dewey's strategy of replacing dichotomies with continuities and integrating the aesthetic into life's manifold pursuits" (127). In this it concurs with poststructuralist rejections of false dichotomies. The weakness of some postmodern endeavors expose themselves when traditional or more analytic positions have been misconstrued, such as in the unfortunate attempts to characterize classical reason as hopelessly bound to an "either/or" dichotomous logic.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless pragmatism shares the desire for a holistic approach. For Shusterman, the goal of philosophy (and thus theory, as the seat of distinctly *literary* philosophies) is living well: "[t]he aim is not truth for truth's sake, but rather ameliorative care of the self (*epimeleia heautou*), and, as a consequence, the betterment of the society in which the self is situated" (*Life*, 17). It is a "concretely embodied practice rather than formulated doctrine" (17). "[T]ransformational instead of foundational," declares Shusterman, "it should be cultural criticism that aims to reconstruct our practices and institutions so as to

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<sup>7</sup>For a meticulous look into this and other missteps by some postmodern scholars I refer the reader to Devaney's *Since at Least Plato-" and Other Postmodernist Myths* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997). She remind us of the inclusive "or" and that contradiction means opposition in the same sense and at the same time – Plato's *pharmakon*, to take an example made famous by Derrida, should not be understood as a contradiction in being both a poison and a remedy, as it was used in diverse senses.

improve the experienced quality of our lives” (157). Further, it accepts the postmodern “advocacy of the aesthetic,” in which it is not just a “life-practice but ... an *aesthetic* life-practice” (133, 131). Postmodernism wields more weapons than critiques of rationalism that coherentism may elude; Shusterman sees a broad aesthetic drive, as against the rationalistic, as this additional piece of the postmodern arsenal, and takes as paradigmatic of its war with modernism certain debates between Habermas and Rorty (*Life*, 113-129). Such opposition to Socratic and Christian rationality was a hallmark of Nietzschean thought, in his perspectivism and his aesthetics, and he stands as one of the principal forerunners of postmodernism. On these grounds pragmatists largely agree with the postmodernists. We have seen that Shusterman and Dewey advocate integrating aesthetics, ethics, the mind and the body, yet Shusterman provocatively takes issue with the “universal hermeneuticism,” as he calls it, that has been the standard terminus for thinkers who have trodden these paths.

His primary target is a fellow pragmatist, Stanley Fish. Fish is well known for arguing for the unassailable status of interpretation as “the only game in town” in literary theory or indeed philosophy, for “repeatedly insisting that interpretation comprises all our meaningful and intelligent human activity” (Shusterman, *Pragmatism*, 116). We will recall that Shusterman objects to this conclusion partially because he believes that the demise of foundationalism has over-encouraged thinkers like Fish or Gadamer. He worries also that, as in Fish’s case specifically but also in the general, universal hermeneuticism results from sometimes disingenuous and self-serving professional motivations. Conflating “two distinct senses of ‘institution’” and the “literary interpretive community” with the “profession of academic criticism,” Fish makes an “elitist and oppressively constraining” set of moves that “relies on our own professional preoccupation with academic criticism and our self-seeking presumption of its

privilege and unlimited dominion” (111, 112). Nor is this all. The consequences of Fish's and similar views, though ironically disavowed by him outright,<sup>8</sup> unfold as a “deplorable drift” towards “totalizing professionalism and preoccupation with novelty” which ends in demanding that interpretations be “professionally original” in order “to have any value” (105). This is clearly a problem because it not only “brutally constrains the possibilities of value in reading and interpretation” by “[suggesting] that these activities can be properly practiced only by a professional elite,” but “it denies crucial values even to members of that elite”: “since they can hardly be specialists with respect to all literatures and authors, they are inevitably also mere lay readers as well” (105). These concerns, as heavy as they are, weigh on the side of incentives and motivations and deal only obliquely with the core theory of universal hermeneuticism, yet they do enough to alert us to the possibility of a real problem.

If universal hermeneuticism exhibits such domineering tendencies in practice, one might wonder if it has a source in a theoretical error. Shusterman, though he as a pragmatist acknowledges that the universalists are successful in “arguing that all understanding is non-foundational, ... corrigible, perspectival, ...somehow prejudiced or prestructured” and “that no meaningful experience is passively neutral and disinterestedly non-selective,” identifies several weak points in what he gathers to be their best arguments (120, 120-123). All of them essentially depend on the same mistake, which is “to equate the non-foundational with the interpretive” (120). He rightly states that “it just does not follow, unless we presume that *only* interpretation could be prejudiced, while (preinterpretive) understanding or experience simply could not be” (123). That is to say, Shusterman wants us to clarify our language when speaking about and using the word interpretation – it can mean, on the one hand, a deliberate and conscious effort to select, combine, situate, and transform an idea, or group of ideas, as when an interpreter

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<sup>8</sup>See Fish's *Consequences*, in which he declares that theory as a whole can never have any.

translates from one language to another, or it can mean the kind of unconscious, partial understanding that arises from the perspectival limitations of our knowledge, as when we say “I didn't interpret it that way” when talking about a delicate social exchange. When we do, we will realize that to say everything is interpretation, in the first sense, is obviously false; to accept such a position would require us to accept the entirely untenable view that all perspective-holders are always and only actively, cognitively involved in their interchanges with the world. This is not the case. Our passivities in the face of our experiences are vast, diverse, and apparent, and indeed the sites of an enormous amount of theory of all kinds. We should be careful to notice that “although all understanding is selective, not all selective understanding is interpretive,” and to “distinguish perceptions and understandings that are immediately given to us (albeit only corrigibly and based on prior experience) from understandings reached only by interpretive deliberation on the meaning of what is immediately given” (124). Once we do, we will more firmly grasp the difference between ordinary and literary language, between linguistic philosophy and lived experience, between the text and “*hors-texte*,” and the possibilities of proceeding on from many of the quandaries and paradoxes of postmodern theorizing.

So we see that the elimination of the objective world-picture, of “facts of the matter,” does not leave us in complete free-play, where every possible interpretation, even for only a given individual, is as good as any other. Each interpretation will have its strengths and weaknesses; James and the pragmatists believe that incoherence and contradiction reveal weaknesses. When we go to use our interpretation, contradictions will create self-defeating stresses and frictions. Our interpretations can be expanded, shifted, ameliorated. When we reread the same text, we may arrive at a better interpretation than previously, relative to our current historical position. In the same way, any idea can find possible improvement across our

experience if we creatively push our interpretive boundaries.

While Shusterman's divergence from universal hermeneuticism is, in one sense, a minor objection, it admits enough to let in doubt, speculation and inquiry. If interpretation is not the be-all and end-all of our practice, and affective, physiological, linguistic, or other noncognitive understanding helps constitute it, some old theoretical chestnuts resurface. Are there delineations to human perspectives, for instance, that are common to all because of similarities and shared heritages in their bodies? Do common biological vectors of activity and receptivity, of sense, memory, imagination, and so forth, amount to something at all like a "human nature"? It is difficult to imagine a better possible locus for it than the embodied and mindful experience that Rorty, Fish, and universal hermeneuticists eschew and that Dewey and Shusterman aim to expand. Perspectivism does not necessarily entail radical, individual atomism. It is one thing to say that every thought, every idea is perspectival – it is another to say that they are also absconded. There may still be room for argument to the effect that all human beings share particular perspectives, or at least that they overlap in certain particulars. If so, might traditional ideas that hinge on this conception, such as universals, the collective unconscious, or Chomskian linguistics, to name a few, find respite? How closely might our perspectives overlap? What changes to our methods can we implement that might improve the study and production of literature were we to make discoveries in these directions?

The opening up of theory again to questions such as these, with vital, practical consequence in our everyday lives, marks one of pragmatism's most alluring features, as it does not to lose sight of what we have learned from postmodern projects in doing so. While the pragmatic movement encompasses a wide variety of practitioners and theories, we have seen that its attractiveness pivots on five pivotal traits: a coherentist epistemology, a humanistic holism, a

robust theory of instrumental truth, and an encouraging yet sober pluralism in interpretation. We are just now witnessing the expansion of scholarship around “pragmatist aesthetics,”<sup>9</sup> and I believe that, if brought cohesively into literary studies, it may fuel the honest and lucid engagement with both literature and its world that can bring us closer to social and personal fulfillment.

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<sup>9</sup>For reference, see Wojciech Malecki's edited collection, *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics: Critical Perspectives on the Arts*, 2014, and *Shusterman's Pragmatism: Between Literature and Somaesthetics*, 2012.

## CHAPTER II

### A DRAMA PRAGMATICALLY CONSIDERED: ETHICS IN *THE MAID'S TRAGEDY*

Two gentlemen dressed in the finery of an ancient Rhodesian court are about to meet. One, a virtuous soldier returned home by his lord's command, fears for the other, his longtime friend, who, entering, laments to himself of a peculiar hardship: his marriage, arranged by this selfsame King, is a sham, and he has agreed with his deceptive wife to hide its scandal and his shame. Alone on the stage, the two figures near each other, drawn by friendship, but before any fraternal reception concludes their plaintive conversation, they part. A cry goes out, and again they approach. The shamed man weeps. Suddenly, emotion ignites. They both spring back, hands on sword-hilts. Confessions of the cuckold offend the soldier. Their disputation continues; swords are drawn! They poise themselves in anticipation of violence. But the soldier's temperance now intervenes; with an impressive self-command, he sheathes his sword and hostilities end. We witness departure, only to be punctuated once more by an angry return and the flash of steel, this time in reverse sequence: our put upon husband will not so easily yield. Now, as if in a rhythm, benevolence has its turn to assuage the temper of each. Finally, the languisher, Amintor, touches our soldier, Melantius, and leans on him, "sick, and desperately" (Beaumont and Fletcher, *The Maid's Tragedy*, III.ii.253-4).

The preceding imaginatively plays out the famous argument in Act 3, Scene 2 of Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*. Opening up the text of a play such as this to its full instrumental potentiality, if denied its immediate apprehension by distances in time and space, requires us at least to envision the physical dimensions of the performance, its motions and dispositions, colors and sounds, along with the emotional and psychic affections we would

feel as its audience, or perhaps even as its actors. Can we not sense intensities of emotion, barely restrained, in the repeated advances and retreats, the brandishing and quelling of blades, the audible cries and the palpable collapse? Quickly, detachment and skepticism *do* rise up to challenge our belief in them and threaten our access to their multifarious powers of intellectual and aesthetic expansion. So we search about for a theory or a perspective in which we might fit them. This is a difficult and complex task. In our more subdued and comfortable age, what might bring two friends nearly to deadly blows we are apt to think more considerable than could be conveyed by so brief an exchange. Rapid swings in mood we find unconvincing. No doubt the bonds of family honor pull less forcefully, if at all. When our attempts to discover how to contextualize these intensities fails, the usual response is to dismiss them as empty artifice, a sensationalist's trick. David Bevington, though he includes the play for our consideration as an exemplary piece of English Renaissance drama in a recent anthology, still believes that these “changes are too rapid to be psychologically plausible,” that “they are driven instead by courtly attitudes in conflict with one another and by the audience’s presumed delight in kaleidoscopic reversals of plot” (1145). It has been difficult for critics, as Sandra Clark alleges, to “identify 'real' selves” in Beaumont and Fletcher's characters, to “unify the fragmented utterances of the speakers” in their plays (8). If we fail to construct a framework in which scenes like the dispute between Melantius and Amintor can hang, the likely outcome will be to further that long critical tradition which nearly succeeded in demoting Beaumont and Fletcher to that of the “theatrical hack.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Sandra Clark and Lawrence Wallis provide thoroughgoing histories of *TMT*'s reception and the reputation of our playwrights, who, from the outset and continually down through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, received censure from prominent critics like Rymer, Coleridge, Dryden, and Eliot despite their original popularity; with time and many unfavorable comparisons with their favorite, Shakespeare, these assessments only increased in vitriol, particularly in accusations of royalism and immorality (Clark 1-20, 101-102; Wallis 44-125). Even into the twentieth century, when writers like Wallis had begun to thaw the critical storm against them, one still finds prevalent reactions of shock and disgust: Ornstein condemns what he calls Fletcher's “ethical frivolity” as

Traditionally, *TMT* has been either appreciated or criticized almost exclusively for its “theatrical effectiveness” (Wallis 108); for centuries the collaborative products of Beaumont and Fletcher were compared unfavorably with Shakespeare's, and this may be due largely to some basic philosophical differences between them (Clark 4). Their great contemporary, Shakespeare can be profitably read as speaking from the pinnacle of centuries of evolution in theories of natural law, and this approach coincided easily with critics' Cartesian and Kantian tendencies which often proceeded under a mind-body duality.<sup>11</sup> In *TMT*, on the other hand, Beaumont and Fletcher seem to question or even defy natural hierarchy and law, and it is perhaps the urgent physical motion of its “theatricality,” and the unspoken potential for political subversion in that energy, that most differentiates it from the Shakespearean mold. My project, then, reevaluates *TMT* in the terms of a more body-conscious style of philosophy that can appreciate their designs as subversive and ethically fraught and avoids mistaking their concerns as merely “adolescent.”<sup>12</sup>

I will contend that there exist explanations and connections well within our reach that can account, at least with respect to *The Maid's Tragedy*, for the nature of B&F's dramaturgy without lamely acquiescing to those who see in it little more than ostentation. The insights that reveal them, in this case, lie in both historical and contemporary discussions on ethics. Once we assimilate them, *The Maid's Tragedy* transforms, becoming for us eminently valuable as both an imaginative and materialized (in its performance) exploration of the question of our ethical

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“disturbing and reprehensible” and compares him only somewhat favorably to an imagined “theatrical hack” (163).

<sup>11</sup>This is the meticulous thesis of George Herndl, who claims that “Shakespearean tragedy is an imaginative testimony to the moral intelligibility of the world” under natural law theories, that “its universe constitutes an order in which human rationality accords with the good, evil is the perversion, rather than the course, of nature, and the highest moral aspirations are in harmony with nature's demands” and that “nowhere is it antinomian . . . nowhere in it is essential humanity fatally constricted, as in some later drama, by the confines of the moral law, nor human virtue destroyed by its incommensurability with the natural world” (13). Beaumont and Fletcher and others of the Jacobean and Carolinian periods, he believes, become disenchanted with this picture, and “did not continue the earlier tragic mode” because of the perceived “failure of the medieval and Elizabethan concept of natural law” (291-292).

<sup>12</sup>To quote a typically condescending critical sentiment: “Beaumont and Fletcher's work indicates the collapse of a culture, an adult scheme is broken up and replaced by adolescent intensities” (Danby 165).

choices, ways of living and of being, when impinged upon by a social structure that reifies political authority.

Certain theoretical biases underlie the usual aspersions upon our playwrights which deny them this reading. One of the most powerful of them, a dependence on ideas of psychological integrity or believability that describe real human beings, the basis for the supposed mimetic character, as constituted in a particular manner – namely, that they act in fairly benign and predictable ways that can be derived from a combination of their current and historical interests or motivations as mental agents – occludes important ethical concerns at play in *The Maid's Tragedy* which turn on more holistic views of the human subject. From a dualist perspective, radical breaks in a character's psychological continuity, surprises or “reversals,” stretch credibility because they don't easily conform to expected patterns of behavior, and instead seem merely to reflect patterns of authorial fiat. Any tendencies of this kind to downplay the physical, unconscious, and subconscious forces that influence the psyche will render the character of Melantius quite enigmatic. Given his pivotal, active role, with its correlated interpretive centrality, losing footing here leaves critics adrift in efforts to handle the play cohesively.<sup>13</sup> I would suggest that the power that afforded to Beaumont and Fletcher the unequivocal praise and fame of the Jacobean court and the audiences of Blackfriars and The Globe stems from body-conscious ideas of character, and humanity more generally. A brief look to the history of ethics will enable us to locate conceptual fault-lines that ruptured ideas of the body from ideas of ethics, and consequently the acclaim of critics from *The Maid's Tragedy*. We will then turn to

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<sup>13</sup>Without recognizing the breadth of Melantius' ethical role, even modern criticism has tended towards stark disagreement or confusion. Finkelparl wonders how anyone could seriously doubt the heroism of Melantius and thus the play's subversive tone (196-216). Shullenburger thinks him more of an “unstable egotist,” a dangerous and nearly incestual man whose commitment to “family honor scarcely veils the seething patterns of family romance” (143-144). Rebecca Bushnell finds too many contradictions and ambiguities regarding the political (and thus, ethical) meaning of the play for her to judge one way or the other (187). Similarly, Ornstein believes that “within [The Maid's Tragedy] ... there is no pattern of intellectual resolution,” nor even any actual “continuing interest in specific ethical questions” (45).

historical details near our authors, and finally to the text itself.

### **Classical and Christian Ethics**

The dialectic of classical and Christian ethics reached an apex with the incipience of the early modern period. If over a millennia of adoptions, absorptions, and transformations had produced many hybrids, from St. Augustine's *The City of God* to Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, it was clear by the end of the middle ages that the most salient difference between classical and Christian ethics was in where they located its origination: for the most part, Christian natural lawyers, following the Platonists, saw ethical mandates emanating from outside the human, drawing us towards a perfection of the soul, from the will of a God transcendent over the material world. Even though they believed that the conscience and the proper investigation of nature could point us toward this law, which was supposed to direct all creation to its teleological good, their unwavering adherence to scripture would attenuate these potentially humanistic tendencies. As the Bible clearly established, humans were fallen creatures, perpetually blinded by sin, meaning that the conscience and all the powers of reason available to the sinner would not have the power to discover the law in its entirety. They were consequently required to obtain the help of divine forces, through holy writ, revelation, or the grace of Christ. The search for ethical grounds was extruded from them, abstracted away into a mystery, increasingly divorced from human thought, body, and sense. The eventual culmination of the natural law philosophies took the form of deontology, elaborated most sensitively by Kant, according to which we must do our duty to the ethical law no matter how arcane or repulsive to our instincts it might be.<sup>14</sup> For those in this tradition, mankind must always shackle itself to discretion, lest it be tempted into wickedness and barbarism by its natural baseness. In short, they reified their ethical intuitions

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<sup>14</sup>For an instructive look into the two principal ethical worldviews in modern times which illustrates the deontologist's occasional need for self-abnegation, see Susan Wolf's "Moral Saints" (*The Journal of Philosophy*. 79.8, Aug 1982: 419-439).

and emotional beliefs into immutable laws or universal rules discoverable and explicable only to reason, just as they had substance, the mind, and the soul.

Aristotle's vision was quite different, and the emergence of another moral compass informed by his ethics, running in rough parallel to that established by early Christians, is explained by the loss of Greek scholarship in Europe during the Latin-dominated period of the middle ages. With Aristotle's later recovery, theorists of chivalry would draw upon his ethics in forming their visions of noble conduct. We shall see how this tradition manifests itself in *The Maid's Tragedy* with respect to one character in particular, Melantius, and observe how the ethical thought of Aristotle provides a key to his interpretation.

His ideas contrast with that of the early Christians in two pivotal, related aspects. First, for Aristotle the human is an inherently and essentially embodied being (Williams 39). The “soul,” for him, does not refer to a transcendent, disembodied part of our makeup. Secondly, ethics is not a question of obedience to laws, even ones that may be imprinted, as the natural lawyers think, in us, making themselves known through our sense of conscience. Instead, it is a question of sound judgment and properly balanced action which can only be answered by the virtuous person individually, whose treatment of it must be developed and sustained by material habit. Consequently the Aristotelian virtues quite literally reside in the embodied self, molded by habit and responsive to stimuli both conscious and unconscious, mental and physical. A further result, of particular importance to our reading, arises along the political axis.

A devotee of Aristotelian virtue ethics may make normative judgments about individuals by assessing their character as a congress of their virtues and vices, with little or no reference to outside laws or their obedience. For the “friend of virtue,” to use Schneewind's word, praise or blame should be given contingent upon on the degree of courage, temperance, prudence, and so

forth, that they have, and not on how faithfully they follow the dictates of others, whether priest or magistrate. If reference is made to obedience in this context, it generally means a fidelity to *phronēsis*, “practical reason,” the capacity within that person for active, embodied discernment, and any similarity between its demands and those of external rules will be coincidental. That is to say, it may be that a person's temperate quality would have them avoid public drunkenness, and in such a case they only just so happen to act lawfully. Whereas if the law were changed, and inebriation not sanctioned but mandated, they would act in exactly the same way: temperately, yet criminally. Under this paradigm an individual will be judged independently from external rules, on the merits of their apparent virtues; a criminal may be a virtuous woman, and a king a man filled with vice.

### **Beaumont and Fletcher and the Scene at Whitehall**

Reformation and counter-reformation, skepticism, atheism, the new science, and worries about monarchy under the pontificating James I all fomented intellectual and ethical questioning amongst the royal coterie during Beaumont and Fletcher's time.<sup>15</sup> As relatively educated men they would have been aware of these currents, and undoubtedly suited their themes for an audience of diverse and contentious opinions. An intentional multivocality at the heart of *The Maid's Tragedy*, as regarding questions arising from its ethical dilemma, can help explain both its original popularity and its eventual decline. After the Restoration and the shoring up of the monarchy, political or even philosophical dissent becomes less acceptable, and the freedom exhibited on the stage in the previous decades seems more licentious than creative. Edmund

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<sup>15</sup>The religious tumult wrought by Luther and Calvin, the philosophical queries and challenges of Grotius, Montaigne, and Machiavelli, the theocratic and political writing of James I, the new science of Bacon & Donne – the end of the Elizabethan era heralded all of these immensely controversial topics, and rapid proliferations of intellectual yet violently passionate convictions and skepticisms background the life of London and the court in which Beaumont and Fletcher were immersed.

Waller rewrites the play to make its ending palatable to the properly King-fearing.<sup>16</sup> Charles II may have banned its performance altogether. Critics at this juncture turn to *TMT* and fault it on the one hand for its liberality, in its sexual content for example, or, on the other, by impugning its authors by attributing to them the prevailing conservative political attitudes they are accustomed to seeing post-Restoration. Because of its multiplicity, blinkering but a few beams can almost make the claim that B&F were, as Coleridge called them “servile royalists,” seem plausible (qtd. in Clark 3). On the other hand, simultaneously appreciating even just the two most dominant and general currents in ethical thought during their time changes our estimation entirely. Beaumont and Fletcher make it apparent in *The Maid's Tragedy* that neither of the predominant ethical traditions, neither Christian nor the classical, could possibly perform their function of underwriting a sanguine role for the human subject under an absolutist monarchy of the kind that James I espoused.<sup>17</sup> They stage a tragedy in which two exemplary followers of these schools – Melantius, a chivalrous type of virtue ethicist, and Amintor, an obedient courtier – face inevitable suffering and defeat at the hands of an arbitrary and tyrannical monarch.

### **The Virtuous and the Law-abiding: Melantius and Amintor**

Opening the play's first scene, Melantius' welcome home to Rhodes promptly establishes a contrast between him and the King's more sorry subjects. Melantius declares himself a man of action. We will learn through his language and behavior that his motives and values spring from within, moving him seamlessly, of their own accord and without pause for mediation by conscious deliberation. The exchange between him and the royal brother Lyssipus tells us this:

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<sup>16</sup>There were two publications containing his alteration, *The maid's tragedy altered with some other pieces / by Edmund Waller, Esq.; not before printed in the several editions of his poems* (London: Printed for Jacob Tonson, 1690) and *The second part of Mr. Waller's poems : containing his alteration of The maid's tragedy : and whatever of his is yet unprinted : together with some other poems, speeches, etc. that were printed severally and never put into the first collection of his poems* (London: Printed for Tho. Bennet, 1690).

<sup>17</sup>This was a theme of theirs continued in *Philaster* and *A King and No King*.

Noble Melantius, the land  
By me welcomes thy virtues home to Rhodes,  
Thou that with blood abroad buyest us our peace.  
The breath of kings is like the breath of gods;  
My brother wished thee here, and thou art here.  
Melantius My lord, my thanks; but these scratched limbs  
of mine  
Have spoke my love and truth unto my friends  
More than my tongue e'er could. (I.i.13-24).

What is notable here is not only that Melantius downplays the high-flown, regal rhetoric of Lysippus ('the land / by me welcomes'; 'breath of kings'), but that he explicitly puts forward an aspect of his body – in this case, his “scratched limbs” – as the source of real expressive power. For Melantius, such lies not in inflated speech, but in the activity of his body, trained and rigorously conditioned (one scratched limb implies endurance of a battle-stroke, scratched *limbs* implies a persistence through multiple injuries, a sure sign of an inveterate hardiness). Just as striking is Lyssippus' equation of Melantius with the virtues themselves – it is the virtues which are welcomed, identified as and embodied in Melantius, and not vice versa. The conflict between the physically active modes of expression and the mere verbal initiated here will carry forward through the play. It reflects a deep friction between the Aristotelian and the medieval Christian ethical outlook; the structured and universalizable qualities of language make it possible as a vehicle of the extrinsic, universal rules that constitute natural law and divine revelation in the Christian tradition, while the particularity of affective sensitivities inherent in the physical body fits it more readily into Aristotelian virtue ethics, with its view of the embodied individual as a source of ethical knowledge.<sup>18</sup> This individual is someone who can, and often must, solve unique problems in new and changing circumstances without recourse to providential rules, as was discussed previously.

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<sup>18</sup>See Schneewind, 19-21, for a valuable overview of the Thomistic approach to virtue in the natural law, which amounts to not much more than “habits of obedience to laws” (20).

During his homecoming scene Melantius begins to demonstrate adherence to this kind of ethical judgment. “[W]here I find worth,” he declares, “I love the keeper till he let it go, / And then I follow *it*” (I.i.24-26, emphasis mine). His loyalty lies with ‘it’; that is, virtue itself, which anyone can either take up, and so gain in him a friend, or abandon, and so lose his esteem. Similar language marks his comments about Amintor: “His worth is great; valiant he is, and temperate, and one that never thinks his life his own / If his friend need it” (I.i.49-51). Amintor he finds worthy because he has shown himself possessor of three principal virtues: courage, temperance, and magnanimity.<sup>19</sup> He continues and recounts how Amintor, as a boy, “would gaze upon” him, “to find in what limb / The virtue lay to do those things he heard” (I.i.53-55). The image of himself that Melantius presents us with is that of a man who has virtues embedded in his body, implanted in its very physicality. This sort of embodiment of the virtues holds uneasily with the Christian idea of them; while the cardinal virtues are catholic in nature, in that they can be practiced by anyone, and thus constitute what can be called natural morality, their ultimate source is in God, and not in the human. So in this opening scene Beaumont and Fletcher have begun constructing for us a character of peculiarly classical, and more specifically Aristotelian, dimensions.

How else can we learn what kind of virtue ethics, classical or Christian, Melantius enacts? One feature of the play that affects our understanding of this question would be powerfully manifest to any physical audience: its setting in ancient Rhodes. The action of the play takes place in a Greek city, at an undisclosed point in history (presumably ancient times). Undoubtedly this would call to mind for the audience both the classical thought and traditions so beloved in the Renaissance era and the Christian romance. At least on a substantial surface level

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<sup>19</sup>The basic forms of Virtue, according to Aristotle, are “justice, courage, temperance, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, prudence, wisdom” (*Rhetoric* 1.6).

they are tied to the Greeks, and the ideology of chivalry which shaped the romantic tradition itself had assimilated Aristotelian ethical thought since around the twelfth century (Wollock 21). I would suggest that, if Beaumont and Fletcher displace their political critique of the English monarchy and court implicit in the play's execution of a King into this fantastical setting so as to avoid censure, they may at the same time accomplish an inverse maneuver of bringing classical thought back into court discourses, where indeed it already had increasing influence.

Entertaining a diversity of ideas regarding the court's politics and ethics would have been in keeping with their identities as its “déclassé” yet ambitious habitués (Danby 157). It is certainly not out of the question for them to have intentionally created an Aristotelian character. Studies and commentaries on Aristotle proliferated at an unprecedented rate during the renaissance, and his corpus served as the basis for professorial *cursus* in universities throughout England.<sup>20</sup> While approaches to his philosophies often differed widely, exposure to Aristotle's material, sometimes available even in Greek from either prestigious local printers or by import from the continent, was inevitable for anyone with a university education (Green 257). And of all of Aristotle's works, his *Nichomachean Ethics* found its way into the most academic libraries, classrooms, and studies (Turner 47). Along with Cicero and the Bible, it shaped early modern conceptions of ethics in fundamental ways. Beaumont graduated from Broadgates at Oxford, and Fletcher attended Corpus Christi at Cambridge; they undoubtedly would have been quite familiar with various interpretations of his ethics. Moreover, although chivalry had by their time faded into obscurity, its Aristotelian aspects endured in early modern thought and its romantic tradition backgrounds the play.

Of these, the description of the virtues that Aristotle provides in *Nichomachean Ethics*, as a mean between excess and lack, finds almost direct reference in the language of the play on two

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<sup>20</sup>See Brockliss, Laurence. “Curricula.” *A History of the University in Europe, Vol.2*. Cambridge, 1996.

separate occasions. Amidst the banter of the ladies preparing Aspatia for her wedding night, Evadne quips that “a mean betwixt” the jaunty Dula and the fretful bride “would do well” (2.i.36). The humorous exchange serves as foil to Amintor's utterance later in the same scene, who returns the idea to its more ethical context; bewailing his unforeseen shift in position, he laments to the gods that he sees “no mean, no moderate course to run,” but can only “live scorned, or be a murderer” (2.i.247-248). Virtue, as Aristotle and Aquinas both attest, lies in the middle way, but to Amintor its discovery is denied. He is, in character, unprepared – his plea for guidance itself betrays the fact that the spring of right action, the driver of virtue, which should have been inscribed in his very matter, lies not in him as it does Melantius. So Amintor's decision, unresolved, remains only for his mind to ponder, and for his mouth to uselessly expound. Forestalled by the extrinsic laws against killing, even though virtue may demand it of him, his inaction and fear of the verbal (here, being named a murderer) we will be witness to again later, in a revealing dialog with the King.

While Evadne and Amintor's language calls our attention to the Aristotelian idea of the mean, Amintor's passivity in response to his dilemma shows us the vital importance of forming a virtuous character, one already adept in the immediate apprehension and execution of the proper mean by practical reason, and Melantius' first interactions in the play present him as an exemplar of someone with just such a disposition. We began our handling of the play imagining the acute conflict between Melantius and Amintor, which motivated our pursuit for an understanding of his character that could render him human and the scene creditable; Beaumont and Fletcher anticipate this crucial scene, not only by making mention of the mean, but by more subtly demonstrating the effortless application of it through initial interactions with Calianax. In his first meeting with the old lord, Melantius is already appropriately anodyne –

“well met,” he says, and invites Calianax to bury his “causeless hate” for him (1.ii.55-56). The bitter man returns only insult, but it causes Melantius no quick anger. Proper and natural restraint governs his responses. A terse warning against his unwarranted provocation, a conjuring of excuses for the rude behavior, and the eventual cessation of argument he enacts naturally and easily. Yet he brooks only so much – he by no means yields, in any cowardly way, to Calianax' reproaches, and indeed exerts himself quite earnestly in his own defense. He is awake to the modulating impulses of a temperament which balances his actions, steering them between overbearance and an “unmanly” meekness.

When the argument with Amintor breaks out, we have thus already seen him tested and his claims to virtue tried, if in a rather comic way, so there is little reason, as of yet, to doubt the authenticity of his proclaimed virtue. Furthermore we know that the stakes are here much higher: the subject now involves Amintor, a longtime friend, and touches on Evadne, his own sister, whose reputation he must guard, according to the knightly code, as jealously as his own. Indeed Beaumont and Fletcher bring the powerful nature of the relationship between Melantius and the hapless groom immediately to our attention with the opening scene. Its introduction also tells us a great deal about Melantius relevant to an estimation of him as a man of Aristotelian virtues. Despite his conspicuous soldierly demeanor – his “rough” quality, his “rude carriage” – he is far from hardened at heart (1.i.147-150). Their embrace elicits tears of joy from the war-wrought man (1.2.126-129). Such affective, emotional sensitivity would be the hallmark of one embodying virtue. His physiological and psychosomatic interfaces must function freely and to the proper measure. Melantius, then, is neither brutish nor overly cerebral, playing neither the pedantic lawyer rationally struggling with life's paradoxes, lampooned in the figure of Calianax muttering, “The King may do this, and he may not do it” (2.ii.82-83), nor the nebbish

deontologist, prostrated before the sign of the external law.

With their soldier's virtuous make-up thus attested to by word and action, Beaumont and Fletcher then present to us the first true test of his mettle. Let us examine this scene in detail and discover if Melantius does not exhibit the same natural affinity for the virtuous mean. Only then may we be prepared to appraise it and its producers. We have imaged its performance in our minds eye – now let us paint with the text. Warily emerging into the sunlight of the postnuptial morn, Amintor's beleaguered state turns the sight of his friend into one of amazement; after Evadne's betrayal, he questions whether even Melantius may be false:

AMINTOR                    I wonder much, Melantius,  
To see those noble looks that make me think  
How virtuous thou art; and, on the sudden,  
'Tis strange to me that thou shouldst have worth and honor,  
Or not be base, and false, and treacherous.....  
I know thee to be full of all those deeds  
That we frail men call good; but by the course  
Of nature thou shouldst be as quickly changed  
As are the winds, dissembling as the sea.... (3.1.49-60)

His wonderment comes from the shattering of the social rules that he had believed secure by one so close to him and, especially, by its putative sovereign. He is suddenly willing to disbelieve all appearance of virtue. The changing winds simile in lines 59-60 calls back to the escape of Boreas during the masque, whose rupture of the divine order parallels the chaos that the King's nature does to the social and ethical structures supposedly justified by Christian natural law;<sup>21</sup> the gap between the material reality of human desires and behavior and the idealized roles they would play in this structure has revealed itself to Amintor, and because he localizes the ethical origin outside the human, he is left to doubt its own normative value. Melantius intones a pertinent question in answer: why should his nature be so mutable (67)? He will challenge Amintor's

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<sup>21</sup>Michael Neill admirably describes the influence of the masque on the play, in both structure and theme, and observes that the “dance of wind and sea gods,” which symbolizes “the reasonable ordering of the passions necessary to nuptial harmony,” are “compromised by the escape of Boreas” (132).



MELANTIUS           What, am I tame?  
After mine actions, shall the name of friend  
Blot all our family, and strike the brand  
Of whore upon my sister, unrevenged?  
*My shaking flesh*, be thou a witness for me  
With what unwillingness I go to scourge  
This railer, whom my folly hath called friend!  
I will not take thee basely [*He draws his sword*]. (3.ii.136-142, emphasis mine)

What dire straits this man's virtue must navigate! Until now, the balance to be maintained was relatively undemanding, between the callousness of indifference to his friend's mysterious troubles and rude impropriety, between self-confidence and bashfulness; with this startling revelation, his sensorium is thrown into disarray – already piqued, but now thrust into even greater altitudes. Momentarily his rage threatens to overpower all else, conquering the assembled “unwilling” forces of his remaining psychic constituents – but only momentarily. He does not, in the end, yield to anger. He does not strike. The pit of folly has appeared before him, and he has stopped on the brink. This may seem perilously close to a break with verisimilitude, but keeping in mind the holistic equilibrium that the mean of Aristotelian virtues entails, it rather seems entirely correct. If we forgive Melantius, as Beaumont and Fletcher's somewhat romantic personage, a deeper concern for public reputation (honor) and, as a soldier, a quicker reliance on the sword, than we of a more modern sensibility might have, then can't we say that his reactions are actually apropos? It would certainly indicate a lack of virtues to be unaffected by Amintor's news – filial affection, for instance, or a respect for social standing, and possibly sexual temperance. Though Amintor calls his reply “base,” the accusation is undercut by both his foreknowledge of the effect it would have and Melantius' own forbearance. Melantius feels enough, but stops just short of feeling too much. His personality reverberates like the striking of finely tuned string – as loudly as pressure demands, but always on pitch, always within a harmonious range. For the remainder of the scene it rings out, showcasing the emotional ambit

and final intimacy that results from engaging such a one as “will do what worth / Shall bid [him], and no more,” whose “heart will never fail” (3.ii.251-252, 263). There is struggle, and nearly tragic disaster, but little, if any, hesitancy; while Amintor racks his soul over the seeming impossibility of his predicament, Melantius directly and instinctively arrives at a way forward: revenge against the King himself, whose “throne of majesty” does not frighten him (3.ii.248). His resolution comes up from his very “blood” (3.ii.286). Even here, however, there is modulation: “To take revenge, and lose [himself] withal, / Were idle,” he realizes, and so reigns in his plan (3.ii.288-289). Melantius has proven himself no blusterer, but a man habituated to enacting the mean of virtue in true Aristotelian fashion; thus, he can be a source of ethical knowledge about how to act in his peculiar circumstance, and decide that regicide is the virtuous act, while Amintor, plagued with a particular weakness, cannot bring himself to do so.

Bolstering the contention that Melantius should be read as a heroic character is the fact that his role may well have been played by Richard Burbage, and definitively was filled by his successor John Lowin (Craik 26). T. W. Craik, in his introduction to the play, observes that “the part of Melantius has always been given to the principle tragic actor,” and believes, not implausibly, that this is because he must have “maturity and authority” as a soldier and the chops to act well opposite Calianax in the “serio-comic” scenes (27). I would suggest additionally that the choice also reflects the ethical weight the character must endure; he is the more tragic because the more heroic, and must be able to bear the audience's most intense scrutiny to retain such status.

Next to the paragon of Melantius, Beaumont and Fletcher give us Amintor, another male courtier of repute. The most important distinction between them stems from their differing attitudes towards the possibility of rebelling against the King. We have seen that Melantius feels

no compunctions whatsoever, but Amintor the opposite. And it his fear of the law, and its verbal tokens, that supplies his cowardice. He worries that, should the King tell him to his face of his adultery, he would “be apt to thrust this arm of mine / To acts unlawful” (3.i.165-166). The law, not virtue, forces his hand, and he clings to it even having named the King a tyrant (3.i.235).

Amintor holds to the traditional Christian legal theory of sovereignty, in which a King is both an office, created and upheld by God, and the man appointed to it.<sup>22</sup> Observe his acknowledgment of the King's dual nature when the King comes to assure himself that Evadne has not slept with her new husband:

If you have any worth, for heaven's sake think  
I fear not swords; for, *as you are mere man*,  
I dare as easily kill you for this deed  
As you dare think to do it. *But there is*  
*Divinity about you* that strikes dead  
My rising passions.... (3.1.248-253, emphasis mine)

The King is both a man and a servant ordained to a divine office in Amintor's eyes. Such a position allies him, philosophically, with the natural lawyers of the medieval tradition, as opposed to the classical virtue ethics of Melantius. But his full development as a deontological subject displays itself elsewhere. If rules govern ethics, they can exist in language alone, whose public structure, alive to cultural changes, makes them articulable to everyone, regardless of their physical and psychic differences. Thus, when we witness Amintor's obeisance to a linguistic sign, a mere word, we can be confident of his position within the ethical discourse that Beaumont and Fletcher are staging. “Oh,” he cries to Evadne,

thou hast named a word that wipes away  
All thoughts revengeful. In that sacred name,  
“The King,” there lies a terror. What frail management  
Dares lift his hand against it? (2.i.308-310)

Terror and helplessness are the lot of the deontologists, who surrender their freedom to change

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<sup>22</sup>B&F's reference to this, via Calianax' comedic line at (1.i.17), satirizes the position.

their fortunes and conquer their challenges individually before a global set of strictures, and Amintor suffers as one of them, unable to match the dynamism that a friend of virtue like Melantius can achieve.

Ultimately, however, Beaumont and Fletcher stretch Melantius to the limit of his virtues, and perhaps beyond, when they stage Evadne's conversion in the first scene of Act 4. By bravely swearing to exact revenge on the king without foolishly wasting his own life, Melantius treads an honorable path forward, yet his task proves impossible without outside assistance. Evadne he recruits to the purpose, but his method would surely raise even some friendly eyebrows in Jacobean audiences: he brings real violence and mortal threats to bear on his own sister (stage directions at lines 50 and 99 direct him to “seize her” and “force her to her knees,” with sword drawn). Just as his individual commitment to ethics renders his political ties malleable, filial bonds, too, are subordinate to his personal judgment. When Evadne names him brother, he replies “I'll be wolf first / ... I am as far from being part of thee / As thou art from thy virtue” (4.i.62-65). Melantius lives up to his boast from the first scene (“I love the keeper [of worth] till he let it go”) (1.i.25). That his gambit works complicates our interpretive issue even further: within the heroic reading, this might prove the righteousness even of his violent threats, especially given the fairly convincing remorse of Evadne, but all the same the application of the sword here seems strained. We must remember that the Hellenic norms surrounding marriage and adultery not only preceded but partly engendered those of Catholic Europe. Melantius' passionate concern in the matter of Evadne's repentance of adultery is in keeping with Athenian mores, and even more so those of Christianity, dealing as they do with eternities of salvation or damnation. So Beaumont and Fletcher may well present this brutal exchange fully confident that their audience would take it rather in stride; for them, and for us if we wish to understand the

play from their historical context, Melantius remains an archetype of virtue. Otherwise, we can note that while the deficiency of Amintor is obeisance, Melantius' flaw, if we take him to have one, is the same. He became a soldier by his king's commands, unfit for the “silken wars” that a conversion of Evadne would more properly constitute, and his evilly instilled martial tendencies, stemming from a misplaced trust in the political hierarchy, make the sword his ultimate recourse when faced with the practitioner of vice.

### **Conclusion**

The fact that both our acmes of virtue – Melantius, of the classical, and Amintor, that of the emerging deontology of the Christian royal court – share the same difficulty despite their differences illustrates the overriding theme that emerges when we take stock of the ethical dimensions of *The Maid's Tragedy*: the untenable quality of ethical life under the absurd edifice of absolute monarchy. As Shullenburger remarks, the play's “inability to settle the crises it dramatizes [does] not signal the lack of poetic integrity, but a loss of innocence” (132); Beaumont and Fletcher demonstrate a failure to negotiate the commonplace social problem of adultery by the two most tried ethical positions when impinged upon by the inherently factious political authority purported to rest in the body and the office of James I and actualized in the play as the nameless King. Pragmatically, *The Maid's Tragedy* fits within a historical context of discourse between classical and Christian ethics, itself struggling under sociopolitical concerns about divine right, and can thus serve as a beautiful and engaging instrument to advancing our investigations – whether historical or contemporary, aesthetic or ethical, theatrical or theoretical – into these topics especially. Previous negligence of its connections to such ethical discourse has greatly depreciated its value; I hope that henceforth it would not be in this sense underestimated.

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