

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

A New Way to Pay Old Debts 1625

Philip Massinger 1583-1640

OVERVIEW

Massinger the person

Philip Massinger was born a commoner, but was able to manage a serious education at Oxford, where his father, too, had received his Master's degree, and remained a vigorous presence throughout his life. The son took his own direction, upon graduation from Oxford. But what was that direction? From 1606-13 Massinger effectively disappears from sight, reappearing finally in the London theatrical milieu, collaborating with his friend and frequent collaborator, John Fletcher. (He worked his way into the inner circle of the theatrical world, rising to the position of chief playwright to the King's Men theatrical company.) Throughout his professional career he remained immersed in the theatrical world--though few details are known of him. His death perplexes us as do the details of his life. He died in his home, on March 18 1640, alone and having enjoyed, apparently, quite good health to the end. He was buried in St. Saviour's churchyard, alongside his friend and frequent collaborator, John Fletcher. Both men were deeply embedded forces in the London theater.

CHARACTERS

Lovel, an English lord. Supple, friendly, self-confident but opposed to any intermarriage from within his family with the 'common people, even with Margaret the pure and beautiful.

Sir Giles Overreach, a 'cruel extortioner' as the original playbill put it, and indeed without redeeming characteristics. Scrooge he is not exactly, but a stepchild of the new cutthroat money hunger of London capitalism.

Wellborn, a prodigal nephew of Sir Giles. Careless on an everyday basis, but a charmer to Lady Allworth, and a former befriender of her husband, a keepsake he plays to his advantage.

Allworth, a young gentleman, page of Sir Lovel. Of high birth, deeply resentful of the new commercial society, in which he is consigned to a subordinate role.

Marrall, a creature of Sir Giles Overreach. An all purpose lawyer-servant, useful for dirty jobs of any sort.

Willdo, a parson

Lady Allworth, a rich widow and object of widespread attention in the village. Eventually marries Lovel, with whom she shares out Sir Giles' assets to the villagers whom he has long abused.

Margaret, Sir Giles' daughter. Beautiful, virtuous, self-effacing, ultimately marries Tom Allworth. Lovel, the noble, did not want such a commoner as this in his own family line, despite her attractiveness, but his son Tom wins the prize.

SYNOPSIS

Background

The story of the play that brought high fame to Massinger, *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, went to the heart of the social changes rocking England in the early Stuart period, the early seventeenth century, a moment

when both progressive and regressive trends were intersecting. The progress in British society, from the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries, will have developed around the growth of parliamentarianism, free speech, conscious attention to the legal foundation of state governance, all hinging on the gradual trend toward the beginnings of urbanism, and the gradual accumulation of pockets of capital accumulated through international trade. The ordinary citizen will have known these changes in his bones, as they played out in his daily life—like say, inflation as the guy on the street experiences it today, stage by stage. At the same time, there was, at the time of the present play, a counterpull toward traditional values in Britain. The monarchy was in full charge of national policy, and the power of the class system, which was the British link to its hoariest mediaeval past, was being heard and at least covertly respected. If there was ever a moment of class conflict in Britain this was it, when the great elements of British culture, proud freedom and industrial growth, joined forces.

The plot itself

The present play is set in the middle of this state of affairs in 'a county in Englaone appears. nd.' The setting immerses us in the play and conflict of social classes, which are on vivid display in the small rural community where the action occurs. There are the expected representatives of the landed gentry, headed by Lord Lovel, who represents the social old guard, living on accumulated wealth; there is the rich widow, Land Allworth, cloistered in her noble dignity, but ready to find a new husband, if the right appears. One and not about to descend to a commoner like Sir Giles. Lord Lovel, in particular, represents the dignity and flexibility of the upper classes—as the conservative Catholic Massinger tended to see things. The author and these characters were friends of the old culture. On the other side, but equally wealthy for different reasons, are such as the 'cruel extortioner,' the moneyed 'villain' Sir Giles Overreach, with his attractive and modest daughter, Margaret. (Sir Giles will come on, in this play, both as a comic figure and as a genuine moneybags. Then there is Sir Giles' nephew, Wellborn, along as the stock prodigal. The cast is therefore small, but large enough to represent the dominant issues current in British society. The extortioner Sir Giles is not a 'merchant of Venice,' eager to take interest on loaned money,' but in fact, yes, an extortioner who will wreak havoc on the finances of, say, Frank Wellborn, a prodigal nephew of Sir Giles, as well as on the pocketbooks of the small fry who constitute the bulk of the British agricultural community in question.

From the start, we meet Wellborn and Allworth, members of the local gentry who have lost their moneys to the financial dealings of Sir Giles—and to, we understand, the larger world of heartless finance, to which Sir Giles owes his own training. (Massinger loses no opportunity to take a swipe at the commercialization of society as it takes over in Stuart England). Shortly after, Sir Giles is declaiming, to Marrall his sidekick, that he is determined to elevate his daughter, Margaret, into the noble family of Lovel; to adorn her with the appellation 'honourable.' The classic drive for upward social movement will define the play. We see that Sir Giles has left a trail of financial wreckage wherever he turns, and that he is doing so now in the interest of helping his family break into the nobility.

For Sir Giles the path forward for Margaret will lie through Wellborn, a family member--Giles' nephew---- who will insinuate himself into the romantic life of Lady Allworth. They will fall in love, as they do, and the family connection, of Sir Giles to nobility, will be established. That is the way Sir Giles sees the future. Margaret however, as it turns out, falls in love with Allworth, page to Lord Lovel, and her father the villain, Sir Giles, is exposed and humiliated for his irresponsible financial extortion of Wellborn and other villagers. So severe is Sir Giles' fall from villainy that he suffers what we might call a psychotic episode, and is taken away under mental custody. Lovel and Lady Allworth agree to marry. Margaret and Allworth take control pf Sir Giles' properties and turn them over to Lord Lovel, to make reparations to all the villagers whom Sir Giles has abused. That, we might say, is the moral conclusion of the tale.

SCENES

With the first scene we are plunged into the conflict of the nobility with commoners, as it plays out in a small British village. Frank Wellborn, a rowdy member of the local landed gentry, has just been thrown out of a tavern, and is being supported by another landed gent, Tom, who, like him, has been victimized by the malevolence of Sir Giles, a city type, flush with money and evil plans. This fluent opening introduces us to central characters and the cultural landscape. The clash of the city villain with the landed gentry is harsh.

Tom Allworth's mother, Lady Allworth, urges her son to avoid the dissolute Tom. Both young men visit and interact with Lady Allworth.

Sir Giles Overreach talks with his servant Marall, about his plans to wed his daughter Margaret to Lovel. Sir Giles expresses contempt for Wellborn, until he sees Lady Allworth plant a kiss on his cheek. Maybe, thinks Sir Giles, his own best move is to get control of Lady Allworth's properties.

Romance springs up between Margaret and Lovel's son, Tom. Sir Giles at first thinks that the romance in question is between Margaret and Lovel, but learning it is a romance between the youngsters, his exuberance fades. Tricked by appearances, realizing that Margaret is not leading him into the center of the Lovel fortune, Sir Giles begins to realize that he has miscalculated in his devious plans for village exploitation. Under extreme pressure he falls victim to a psychotic episode, and is conveyed to a mental institution.

Once Sir Giles has been quieted, the finale of the play can proceed. Lovel and Lady Allworth agree to marry, and the properties of the now sidelined Sir Giles are devoted to recompensing village residents who have suffered the cynical machinations of Sir Giles

THEMES

Love Love is of course the universal theme for literature (philosophy and theology too) because, from Lucretius through Faust, from Dante through the Gospels, love is the most ubiquitous driver of human emotions. It can drive men in prison or on the battlefield, in rages of folly or outbursts of insight. In the case of the present play only the love of Margaret for Tom Allworth—or perhaps that of Lovel for Lady Allworth—reaches to anything like a transcendent condition. In world literature, love which passes understanding, as Saint Paul puts it, qualifies as a point of access to god. We are not talking ascent of that character, but of a bonded fidelity which provides ample escape from the iron clad strictures of the money economy.

Class conflict We are still two centuries away from the time when Marxism would stamp its print on a new socio-economic movement, which was destined to shake the world for another century and a half, and leave its traces even today in many parts of the world. Yet even in these first decades of the Stuart monarchy, not more than a stone's throw from the end of the middle ages, Massinger (a strong conservative) writes with great disparagement of the inequalities wreaked by the new wave of government investment, and of social evaluation on the basis of capital.

Greed Sir Giles has a history of exploiting the villagers in his small country town, though indeed we do not face the evidence for this state of affairs. We do, though see the way he threatens his nephew Wellborn. In so doing he forces his own plans—for marriage into nobility—on his nephew, whom he desperately wants to have marry Lady Allworth, the eligible but 'cloistered away' widow of the village. Sir Giles rejoices at the evidence—an exchanged kiss—that something is cooking between Wellborn and Lady Allworth. What he wants, of course, is a marriage that will enable him to get a foot in the door of a noble family, and the Allworth family will do just fine. What strikes us is that Sir Giles is literally consumed with greed for the ripe harvest of the envisioned marriage. He encourages Wellborn's suit by lending him money, for he believes that if Wellborn can insinuate himself inside the noble Allworth line he will acquire rights over the family property. From that point on Sir Giles will reap huge benefits, as a member of the landed gentry.

Discussion Questions

What genre is this play? It has been treated as a tragedy, a melodrama, and as a comedy, for which we take it here. Why?

Is it that Sir Giles is so irredeemably evil and negative that he makes himself seem improbable? Like the television character, Svengoolie, the image cloaked in the figure of Sir Giles is present both to spoof and simulate a horror film man of evil. Is