

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

The Bondman 1624

Philip Massinger. 1583-1640

MASSINGER MORALIST

To a contemporary American, Massinger will seem here, as often, to have written a carefully moral play, and one that touches issues that transcend the local, that reaches us where we are. We see the familiar pattern of a small state (Syracuse, in Sicily) about to be gobbled up by a larger and rapacious state. (Hitler and the Sudetenland? Russia and Ukraine?) We have the portentous state of affairs in Syracuse, that a large and restive slave population is ready to break loose from its bondage in Syracuse, a not unfamiliar resonance, for us, with the frequent and always simmering slave uprisings that pockmarked our own tradition of slavery. (Howard Fast's *Freedom Road* (1944) picks up freedom themes that Massinger was sensitive to). We understand a close knit, carefully plotted picture of corruption in a state, the rotten selfishness of the elite. This particular Massinger play could have sprung from the pen of a last century New York intellectual. What is the tale around which Massinger spins his version of modernity?

PLOT

The play opens on scenes of the upcoming military encounter, which is going to pit the ancient Syracusans against the stronger and belligerent Carthaginians. Archidamus, the Syracusan regent, urges the upper class ladies of Syracuse to be friendly to the regent of Corinth, Peisander, who is coming with his army to protect the Syracusans. Evidently the ladies are given to looking down their noses at foreigners.

Timoleon appears before the assembly of the Syracusans, offering the support of the Corinthians and Peisander. In what was a brutal upcoming assault from the armies of Carthage. Timoleon demands that the wealthy citizens of Syracuse should turn jewelry and other precious objects to the State Treasury!. Cleora is among the first and the most munificent in contributing. The slaves of Syracuse mutter and worry, making their own contingency plans. Leosthenes advances his suit of Cleora, who promises not even to lay eyes upon another man until her beloved returns.

Corisca and her husband Cleon gather in the latter's house--an uprising is in the air-- and as old married extravagants the ladies gossip with one another about their recent affairs.

Pisander, disguised himself as a slave, plots with slaves from Syracuse to stage a slave rebellion, while the upcoming war with the Carthaginians distracts the Syracusan leaders. Peisander's sister, also disguised as a slave, keeps her brother updated from her position as slave maid to Cleora in Syracuse. Bit by bit, Peisander readies a core of slaves ready to spur the resurrection.

The slave rebellion takes place in Syracuse, momentarily upside downing the pattern of culture, turning masters into slaves, and vice versa. It is a moment of chaos in Syracuse. The Syracusan army returns, victorious, but finds that the gates of the city have been locked against them by the reigning slaves.

In a series of touching reencounters the slaves return to their old quiescence, and peace is restored. Post conflict grievances have for the most part been forgotten but there remain cases like that of Peisander, whose insurrectionist role has for the most part been well remembered. Peisander has been imprisoned, and doubts arise about how to deal with this suitor of the slaves, and suitor of Cleora.

CHARACTERS

Archidamus The praetor of Syracuse, father of Tmagoras and Cleora. He turns the power of Syracuse over to Timoleon, and asks the women of the society to be kind to the occupiers and allies

Asotus. A degenerate fop, who abuses his slaves and makes very unsuccessful love to Cleora.

Cimbrio, a slave who runs amok, at the whiff of freedom, and who is freed at the end, on condition that he return to his master.

Cleon, father of Asotus, a greasy lord who has no respect for his slaves, though after the insurrection he blames himself for the damage he has done to his community.

Cleora, daughter of Achidamus, pursued by Leosthenes and Marullo. Expresses an initial interest in Leosthenes, promising to wear a bandanna over her eyes, to shield her from the sight of men. In the end she falls for Peisander.

Timoleon, general from Corimth, chosen to make the Syracusans aware of their own corruptness, and so to protect and guide the Syracusans. He builds up the army, against Carthage, and puts down the slave revolt in Syracuse.

Peisander, a Theban gentleman disguised as a slave. Leads a slave rebellion against Timoleon. At the close of the play Peisander is first imprisoned and then married to Cleora, thanks to the intercession of Archidamus.

Leosthenes, Syracusan who falls in love with Statilia, then with Leora. Returns to marry Statilia after the war.

Corisca, a wanton lady, wife of Cleon, sleeps around freely, abuses her slaves. After the rebellion is put down, she apologizes to her husband for her misbehavior.

Statilia, sister of Peisander. Disguises herself as the slave Timandra. Promised to Leosthenes at the close of the play.

In the final scene, in which Timoleon presides over the ceremony, lovers are appropriately rejoined, injustices forgiven, and the classic resolution, known to us from ancient Greek drama, once again casts its balm over the human condition.

THEMES

Human rights Through the course of the play Massinger threads issues of slave insurrection taking place in the interstices of the Syracusan war with Carthage. The slave rebellion appears to be opportunistic, taking advantage of the state's preoccupation with foreign conflict, in order to bubble up through the cracks in the general society. Massinger gives us, on the whole, a sympathetic picture of the slavery underclass which, in ancient society, comes in for relatively little sympathy, and which itself is different from the hereditary bondage familiar in modern forms of slavery. (Ancient slaves were by and large prisoners of war, in rare cases permitted to serve within captor families, on the whole however confined to manual labor service, often in such arduous workfields as mines or galleys.) Massinger belongs in the forefront of British dramatists, in his sympathy for this class. By the end of the present drama he has shown us the growth of a maturing relation of Syracusan slaves to their rights and obligations within the society. We may appreciate more richly the Massinger of *A New way to pay Old Debts*, who there probes into the dubious financial practices by which the newer structures of lending and indebtedness were strangling small farmers and agriculturalists. Drama as social critique is making its appearance in the age of Shakespeare, for whom, notably, the world of imagination supersedes the world of social actuality.

Love and politics By the end of the present play the lovers appropriate to one another have been apportioned, a degree of harmony has been restored in the city of Syracuse, and the slave uprising has

been quelled. The chaos of war and conflict has been pacified. In this manner the classical task of the drama exfoliated into a new practice of resolution in literature. The roughness of literary exploration has been rounding itself off. Massinger gives us, on the whole, a sense of the origins of literary drama in the west. The origins of that drama, as we learned over a century ago from Cambridge anthropologists like A. B. Cook and Jane Harrison, lay in rural festivals in which dance and song exfoliated into ritualized ceremonies where marriage rites consummated social stability and the healing power of delight. This basic social achievement, naively though it may reach in our ears today, is a lasting effort to account for the deep springs of dramatic energy which penetrate Drury Lane or Broadway at our moment. .

Degeneracy In the figure of Cleon, the corrupt--fat, self-indulgent, immobile--husband of Corisca--Massinger presents us with the type of character who renders a society sluggish and incapable of self-analysis. The wife of this slug, Corisca, is animated, but only so that she can venture forth to seek lovers younger and more vigorous than her husband. (A vital young doctor takes up a good deal of her time). She is a lecherous counterpart to her slug husband, and only at the end of the play do she and her husband recognize their previous childishness. The demands of Peisander, that all citizens sacrifice their jewelry and finery to the war effort, take a long time to sink in, but the eventual victory of Syracuse makes the point vivid in the end. Even Corisca and Cleon begin to understand.

Women's ways Massinger has a satirical gift for putting women into the grinder. It seems that the advent of Peisander and his troops in support of Syracuse, leads the women of Syracuse to indulge in much anticipatory gossip. What are the men of Corinth like? How do they look? How are they as lovers? One is reminded of Aristophanic humor, as we see it in a play like the *Ecclesiazusae*, or the *Thesmophoriazusae*, where the women of Athens employ a certain sacred day to exercise a sacred rite--to pick out passing guys from the street, who have no choice but to give the ladies immediate pleasure. The exercise of such rights, and rites crops up equally in the *Lysistrata*, where Athenian women declare their refusal of the ongoing war, by declaring to their mates that there will be no more sex until the war ends. Massinger goes to the heart of these archaic social relations.

The Classical Instance It is familiar knowledge to us that Renaissance writers, Renaissance culture in the wider sense, embracing all the arts, was drawn to western classical models for its work. It is not that the Romans or Greeks were in fact active in the world lived by Renaissance writers, for in fact the territories once held by the Greeks and the Romans were by the time of the Renaissance long separated from their days of glory. Rather the power of the Classical, over the Renaissance, derived from the literary traditions of the Middle Ages, which though rich and imaginative and chivalric were largely cut off from any relation to the ancient cultural past. It was in the later Middle Ages, with the revivals of education and scholarship, that the sense of the potent actuality of the classical base was reawakened. The development of classical studies, along with the growth of a proto- tourist industry which set out to visit the grand sites of the eastern Mediterranean, opened up social awareness which made for increasingly alert audiences for drama, needless to say for the drama which founded itself, like Massinger's, on a wide ranging familiarity with ancient history and literature.

EVENTS

Cinematic.

There is a narrative boldness in much early English drama that can remind us of the swashbuckling early cinema westerns, the John Wayne era. Warfare figures prominently in the present play, featuring armed conflict, and hard hitting men of command, like Timoleon and Peisander. Real bloody conflict linked cities like Syracuse, Corinth, and Carthage, and Massinger writes straight out of ancient chronicles, from Herodotus to Plutarch. At the same time slave rebellions were in the air of early Roman history, and figure in various early modern plays as theme setters, and pathways into the discussion of political values. Sexual issues weave themselves generously through battles, affairs of uprisings and invasions. Massinger is not to be overlooked in this last respect. The Syracusans ooze with cultural libido. A wanton like Corisca sleeps around recklessly, with anyone except her lecherous husband Cleon, who is squalidly waiting for the guys to come to him. There is nothing subtle about the power with which this play plunges ahead, though there is a moral axis, Massinger's trademark. Slave abuse, indifference to human values,

is unacceptable. Fidelity to one's vows is vigorously affirmed--such gestures as Cleora's, to avoid all contact with any man except Leosthenes. When he returns from the war; though, the same playwright is quick to mock the moral unsteadiness of Cleora, when she turns around and falls for Peisander.. On the positive side, Massinger comes out strongly onto his belief that a more humane and sociable society emerges in Syracuse, from the slave uprising and its worthy demand for rights.