

Domenico Lovascio. *John Fletcher's Rome: Questioning the Classics*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022. Pp 212. Hardback, £80. ISBN 9781526157386. <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526157393>.

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The Fletcher canon (formerly known as ‘the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher’) is a fairly daunting prospect. This set of well over fifty plays, a collaborative canon in which the involvement of John Fletcher is the one near constant, forms something of an icy cliff facing the time-conscious critic of early modern theatre, one tending to discourage aspirant climbers. It would clearly be more efficient to turn to the relatively modest canons of a Webster or, better, a Wilkins. In the twenty-first century, the plays in the Fletcher canon are rarely read, taught, or performed — though honourable theatrical exceptions include fine productions of Fletcher’s *The Island Princess* and *The Tamer Tamed* by the Royal Shakespeare Company back in 2002 and 2003 respectively and, more recently, of Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* by Shakespeare’s Globe (2014) and Cheek By Jowl (2019). The Fletcher canon is also rarely the subject of extended critical attention: Domenico Lovascio’s informed and informative *John Fletcher’s Rome* is only the third monograph-length study of the Fletcher plays in nigh on thirty years. Yet, as Lovascio rightly notes, citing Celia Daileader and Gary Taylor’s observation that Fletcher was ‘by all objective measures more successful as a dramatist than his senior contemporary, Shakespeare’, this runs entirely counter to the standing of these plays in their own day (x). Fletcher was — or, at least, the plays in the ‘Fletcher’ canon were — huge on the Jacobean and Caroline stage, and they were the main basis for the reinvention of theatre at the Restoration. The Romantics, however, loathed these ironic, irreverent, sexually frank plays at least as much as they adored Shakespeare, and the Shakespearean edifice they created has effectively obliterated his successor.

Where, then, does a critic begin when faced with such a vast, unknown, and insistently collaborative canon? The obvious answer is to reduce the scale of the challenge by choosing a subset of playwrights and/or of plays. For decades, critics managed this issue by looking only at the ‘Beaumont and Fletcher’ plays, the impudent, emotionally lavish tragicomedies (plus a couple of tonally tragicomic tragedies) that brought near-instant fame to the duo — above all, *Philaster*, *A King and No King*, and *The Maid’s Tragedy* — along with two solo plays, Fletcher’s *The Faithful Shepherdess* and Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*.

Lovascio finds a new way to make the canon manageable by turning his attention to the four ‘Roman’ plays, redeploying a Shakespearean model as a way to look afresh at Fletcher (and Massinger). The plays are *Bonduca* (1613–14), *Valentinian* (1610–14), *The False One* (1619–23, with Massinger), and *The Prophetess* (1622, also with Massinger). Four Roman plays doesn’t sound many, but Lovascio points out reasonably enough that the number is ‘actually more than Jonson ever wrote’ (2). Focusing on this subset of plays — while demonstrating throughout his impressively assured knowledge of the entire Fletcher canon — Lovascio addresses Fletcher’s attitude both to the classics and to Shakespeare, undertaking a good deal of pleasingly precise source study in order both to unearth a set of attitudes to the classical past that mark a firm contrast with Shakespeare and to offer convincing new arguments about Fletcherian dramaturgy as a whole.

Reverence — not surprisingly, given the overall cast of the Fletcher canon — turns out to be in short supply. Assessing the repetitive curriculum of Fletcher’s grammar school and speculating that the boy’s loathing of his educational experience propelled his later attitudes to certain classical texts, Lovascio notes that Fletcher had a marked habit of ignoring the Latin materials he would have read at school and turning instead to subsequent writers. These include later historians of Rome (Herodian, Cassius Dio, Florus) who wrote in Greek rather than Latin and offered Fletcher quite different possibilities from the names we might expect (Tacitus, Suetonius, Plutarch). Fascinatingly, these subsequent writers also include Shakespeare, whose version of Rome, Lovascio argues, Fletcher treats as a ‘source’ on a par with those of his preferred later-classical-era chroniclers, wilfully eliding the distance between classical past and Jacobean present. Cold-shouldering the obvious early Roman empire sources is a key element in the ‘questioning’ central to Fletcher’s engagement with Rome, Lovascio shows — a questioning of ‘the classics’ monopoly of certain kinds of knowledge and truth’ that is expressed through a process of ‘discrediting Roman paradigms and models ... subtly critiquing exemplary Roman women as exceptionally passive’ and ‘sceptically painting a grim, desolating, and unheroic Roman world’ (7). Lovascio’s model is Walter Benjamin’s reading of seventeenth-century German trauerspiele as works that depict ‘history as mechanical and purposeless[,] cut off from any possible higher meaning’ (9). This perspective enables him to offer a new and detailed dimension to the critical understanding of the unease that characterizes both the plays themselves and responses to those plays over time. In Fletcher’s hands, Rome is no cultural anchor; rather, it the source of deep cultural and chronological disorientation. Whether his engagement with Rome justifies Lovascio’s description

of Fletcher as a 'profound historical and political thinker' (21) I am not sure. It may equally well represent a wilful, and wilfully theatrical, *rejection* of profundity.

Theatre is important here. *John Fletcher's Rome*, despite its intellectual base in source study, is by no means solely textual in its engagement with the canon. True, Lovascio does not address modern performance, but this is simply because none of his focal plays has been the subject of modern revival. He does, though, think about the plays in performance in their own day, offering some intriguing speculation about repertory — about, that is, the possibility that the impact of these plays' tangible remembering of Shakespeare's Roman plays 'could have been enhanced if the same actors performed different (but connected) roles in different plays, thus coupling textual recollection with the bodily memory of their own previous performances' (20). In the end, a certain amount of bathos is unavoidable simply because the material evidence is not there to confirm the possibility that Fletcher's Roman plays were performed by the same actors playing at the same moment in revivals of those of Shakespeare. The intriguing suggestion, for instance, that the 'weird theatrical temporality' of *The False One* — Fletcher and Massinger's Cleopatra play in which the action pre-dates that of *Antony and Cleopatra* but the play's Caesar takes Shakespeare's Antony as an exemplar — would have been markedly developed if the two plays 'were performed alongside each other in the King's Men's repertory' (151) is somewhat undermined by the section's final sentence: 'Unfortunately, there is no evidence that this was the case' (151). Still, new material evidence might turn up, and I would put money on Lovascio's speculations about repertory turning out to be substantially accurate if it does. Moreover, his turn to Shakespeare here and in his chapter on the Fletcher canon's role as an early instalment in the Shakespearean afterlife is important in encouraging readers who are not Fletcher enthusiasts to come to the book. A perennial problem of writing about this canon is that interest in Fletcherian theatre, in direct contrast to its immense importance in its own day, remains niche, and for strategic reasons Fletcher scholars tend to invoke Shakespeare whenever they can, even as they do so to move beyond the Shakespeare monopoly.

This monograph, ground-breaking as it is in several respects, valuably reminds us that Shakespeare and Jonson were not the only dramatists to write 'Roman plays' — that is, to engage with Roman history and thus to intervene in a key aspect of early modern culture, heavily dependent as that culture was on the classical past. There is real value too in showing that it was possible in early modern England to dramatize, as the Fletcher canon clearly does, a substantially more sceptical understanding of the value of the past in general and the classical past in particular than critics find in the plays of Shakespeare or Jonson. But perhaps

the single greatest value of Lovascio's work is that it serves as a reprimand (one implicit in his gently ironic choice of title) to the numerous monographs about 'Shakespeare's Rome' that might lead you to believe that, of all early modern playwrights, only Shakespeare (or, at best, Shakespeare and Jonson) paid thoughtful attention to Roman history. Lovascio is to be thanked for this valuable work of redirection. Two ways forward suggest themselves. One is to find a convincingly fluent way to address the intensely collaborative Fletcher canon without treating it as *de facto* the work of one writer ('John Fletcher's'). The other is to mesh the existing bodies of work on Shakespeare's Rome and on the Rome of Jonson, Massinger, et al. with what we learn from Lovascio about the Rome dramatized in the Fletcher canon into a truly comprehensive overview of the early modern stage's encounter with the classical past. If both of these could be achieved, we would be in truly transformative critical territory.