

Philip Massinger,
A defence of drama (1626)

PHILIP MASSINGER (1583–1640) was probably educated at Salisbury Grammar School, and attended St Alban Hall Oxford in 1602–3, forced to leave when his father died. In 1613 he is next heard of collaborating on plays written for Henslowe. From 1616 to 1625 he wrote many plays together with John Fletcher, principal dramatist for the King's Men, becoming their chief dramatist from Fletcher's death until 1640, writing for both the Globe and Blackfriars theatres. Massinger is known to have written all or part of fifty-five plays, twenty-two of which are lost; of the remaining thirty-three, fifteen were his own work.

TEXT. From *The Roman Actor. A Tragaedie* (1629). Licensed for performance in October 1626, Massinger's dramatization of events in the life of the Roman emperor Domitian (AD 51–96) was the author's favourite work, 'the most perfect birth of my Minerva', as he described it in the dedication. The plot was based on Suetonius' biography—probably in Philemon Holland's translation (*The Historie of Twelve Caesars*, 1606), together with Tacitus, Juvenal, and other sources for the character of Paris, the emperor's favourite actor, who (according to Juvenal) captivated women with his performances, including—fatally for him—the empress Domitia. His defence of the theatre, a famous set-piece for actors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was based on classical and contemporary sources. As Sir Thomas Jay, one of the play's dedicatees, wrote in his prefatory poem:

... when thy Paris pleades in the defence
Of Actors, every grace, and excellence
Of Argument for that subject, are by Thee
Contracted in a sweet Epitome.

In annotating this selection I have benefited from the editions by A. H. Gilbert, *LCPD*, pp. 568–73; *The Plays and Poems of Philip Massinger*, ed. P. Edwards and C. Gibson, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1976); and *The Selected Plays of Philip Massinger*, ed. C. Gibson (Cambridge, 1978).

THE ROMAN ACTOR

[ACT I, SCENE I]

AESOPUS.¹ What do we act today?

LATINUS. Agave's frenzy,
With Pentheus' bloody end.²

PARIS. It skills* not what;

The times are dull, and all that we receive
Will hardly satisfy the day's expense.

The Greeks, to whom we owe the first invention, 5
Both of the buskined scene and humble sock,³

That reign in every noble family,
Declaim against us;⁴ and our amphitheatre,

Great Pompey's work, that hath given full delight
Both to the eye and ear of fifty thousand⁵ 10

Spectators in one day, as if it were
Some unknown desert, or great Rome unpeopled,
Is quite forsaken.

LATINUS. Pleasures of worse natures
Are gladly entertained; and they that shun us
Practise, in private, sports the stews* would blush at. 15

A litter borne by eight Liburnian slaves,
To buy diseases from a glorious* strumpet,
The most censorious of our Roman gentry,
Nay, of the guarded robe,⁶ the senators,
Esteem an easy purchase.

PARIS. Yet grudge us
That with delight join profit,⁷ and endeavour 20
To build their minds up fair, and on the stage
Decipher* to the life what honours wait
On good and glorious actions, and the shame

¹ A famous tragic actor, contemporary with Roscius and Cicero. Latinus was a celebrated mime and favourite of Domitian, for whom he acted as an informer.

² As dramatized by Euripides in *The Bacchae*. Juvenal, *Sat.* 7. 87, mentions an *Agave* which Statius was forced to sell to Paris.

³ Cf. Horace, *Ars P.* 275–81, Heywood, p. 482.

⁴ Juvenal attacked Greek influence on Roman society in *Sat.* 3. 58 ff.

⁵ Built by Pompey in 55 BC. Pliny (*Naturalis historia* 36. 24) estimated that it held 40,000 spectators.

⁶ A toga with a broad purple border, worn by senators.

⁷ Cf. Horace, *Ars P.* 343, and Sidney, pp. 345 ff.

That treads upon the heels of vice, the salary
Of six sestertii.⁸ 25

AESOPUS. For the profits, Paris,
And mercenary gain, they are things beneath us,
Since while you hold your grace and power with Caesar,
We from your bounty find a large supply,
Nor can one thought of want ever approach us. 30

PARIS. Our aim is glory, and to leave our names
To aftertimes.

LATINUS. And would they give us leave,
There ends all our ambition.

AESOPUS. We have enemies,
And great ones too, I fear. 'Tis given out lately
The consul Aretinus, Caesar's spy,⁹ 35
Said at his table, ere a month expir'd,
For being galled* in our last comedy
He would silence us for ever.

PARIS. I expect
No favour from him; my strong Aventine¹⁰ is
That great Domitian, whom we oft have cheered 40
In his most sullen moods, will once* return,
Who can repair with ease the consul's ruins.

LATINUS. 'Tis frequent* in the city, he hath subdued
The Catti, and the Daci, and ere long,
The second time will enter Rome in triumph. 45

Enter two LICATORS

PARIS. Jove hasten it!—With us?—I now believe
The consul's threats, Aesopus.

1 LICTOR. You are summoned
T'appear today in Senate.

2 LICTOR. And there to answer
What shall be urged against you.

PARIS. We obey you.
Nay, droop not, fellows; innocence should be bold. 50
We, that have personated in the scene
The ancient heroes, and the falls of princes

⁸ About a shilling, the price of admission to the Jacobean private theatres.

⁹ Aretinus Clemens, an informer and favourite of Domitian, who commanded the Praetorian Guard, but was suspected of treason and executed.

¹⁰ A potion of great strength.

With loud applause, being to act ourselves,
Must do it with undaunted confidence.
Whate'er our sentence be, think 'tis in sport; 55
And though condemned, let's hear it without sorrow,
As if we were to live again tomorrow.

1 LICTOR. 'Tis spoken like yourself. . . .

[ACT I, SCENE 3]

ARETINUS. The purpose of this frequent* Senate
Is first to give thanks to the gods of Rome,
That for the propagation of the empire 5
Vouchsafe us one to govern it like themselves.
In height of courage, depth of understanding,
And all those virtues and remarkable graces
Which make a prince most eminent, our Domitian
Transcends the ancient Romans. 10

'Tis then most fit

That we (as to the father of our country,
Like thankful sons, stand bound to pay true service 25
For all those blessings that he showers upon us)
Should not connive, and see his government
Depraved and scandalised by meaner men,
That to his favour and indulgence owe
Themselves and being.

PARTHENIUS. Now he points at us. 30

ARETINUS. Cite Paris, the tragedian.

PARTHENIUS. Here.

ARETINUS. Stand forth.
In thee, as being the chief of thy profession,
I do accuse the quality* of treason,
As libellers against the state and Caesar.

PARIS. Mere accusations are not proofs, my lord: 35
In what are we delinquents?

ARETINUS. You are they
That search into the secrets of the time,
And, under feigned names, on the stage present
Actions not to be touched* at; and traduce
Persons of rank and quality of both sexes, 40

And, with satirical and bitter jests,
 Make even the senators ridiculous
 To the plebeians.

PARIS. If I free not myself,
 And, in myself, the rest of my profession
 From these false imputations, and prove
 That they make that a libel which the poet
 Writ for a comedy,¹¹ so acted too,
 It is but justice that we undergo
 The heaviest censure. 45

ARETINUS. Are you on the stage,
 You talk so boldly?

PARIS. The whole world being one,
 This place is not exempted; and I am
 So confident in the justice of our cause
 That I could wish Caesar, in whose great name
 All kings are comprehended, sat as judge
 To hear our plea, and then determine* of us.
 If to express* a man sold to his lusts,
 Wasting the treasure of his time and fortunes
 In wanton dalliance, and to what sad end
 A wretch that's so given over does arrive at;
 Deterring careless youth, by his example,¹²
 From such licentious courses; laying open
 The snares of bawds, and the consuming arts
 Of prodigal strumpets, can deserve reproof;
 Why are not all your golden principles,
 Writ down by grave philosophers to instruct us
 To choose fair virtue for our guide, not pleasure,¹³
 Condemned unto the fire? 60

SURA. There's spirit in this.

PARIS. Or if desire of honour was the base
 On which the building of the Roman empire
 Was raised up to this height; if to inflame¹⁴ 70

¹¹ Jonson complained in *Epicœne* (1616) about malicious commentators who 'make a libel, which he [the dramatist] made a play'; cf. also the preface to *Volpone* (p. 471), on 'invading interpreters'.

¹² On the superior power of poetry to teach by example cf. Spenser, p. 299, Sidney, pp. 351-3.

¹³ In classical and Renaissance moral philosophy *virtus* and *voluptas* are incompatible opposites.

¹⁴ On the power of literature to 'inflame' its audience to virtue, cf. Introduction, pp. 50-5.

The noble youth with an ambitious heat
 To endure the frosts of danger, nay, of death,
 To be thought worthy the triumphal wreath
 By glorious undertakings, may deserve
 Reward or favour from the commonwealth;¹⁵ 75
 Actors may put in for as large a share
 As all the sects of the philosophers.
 They with cold precepts¹⁶—perhaps seldom read—
 Deliver* what an honorable thing
 The active virtue is; but does that fire
 The blood, or swell the veins with emulation,
 To be both good and great, equal to that
 Which is presented on our theatres?
 Let a good actor, in a lofty scene,
 Show great Alcides¹⁷ honoured in the sweat
 Of his twelve labors; or a bold Camillus,¹⁸ 85
 Forbidding Rome to be redeemed with gold
 From the insulting Gauls; or Scipio,¹⁹
 After his victories, imposing tribute
 On conquered Carthage; if done to the life,
 As if they saw their dangers and their glories,
 And did partake with them in their rewards,
 All that have any spark of Roman in them,
 The slothful arts laid by, contend to be
 Like those they see presented.²⁰ 90

RUSTICUS. He has put
 The consuls to their whisper. 95

PARIS. But 'tis urged
 That we corrupt youth, and traduce superiors.
 When do we bring a vice upon the stage,

¹⁵ Edwards and Gibson (edn. cit.) compare Bodin, *Six Bookes of a Commonwealth* (tr. Knolles, 1606), 5. 4, justifying the 'desire of honour': 'I hold that there is nothing more necessary for youth (as Theophrastus said) the which doth inflame them with an honest ambition . . . never any commonwealth did bring forth such famous men, and so many, as Rome did' (pp. 586-7).

¹⁶ Cf. Sidney, p. 351.

¹⁷ Hercules.

¹⁸ Roman general who defeated a Gallic invasion (387 BC), recovering the gold with which the Romans had bought peace.

¹⁹ Scipio Africanus, famous for having carried the Second Punic War from Italy to Africa, defeated the Carthaginians in 202 BC.

²⁰ On the superior power of events presented to the eye, cf. Horace, *Arts P.* 179-82, and Heywood, pp. 486-7.

That does go off unpunished?²¹ Do we teach,
 By the success of wicked undertakings, 100
 Others to tread in their forbidden steps?
 We show no arts of Lydian panderism,
 Corinthian poisons, Persian flatteries,
 But mulcted* so in the conclusion that
 Even those spectators that were so inclined 105
 Go home changed men. And, for²² traducing such
 That are above us, publishing to the world
 Their secret crimes, we are as innocent
 As such as are born dumb. When we present
 An heir that does conspire against the life 110
 Of his dear parent, numbering every hour
 He lives, as tedious to him; if there be,
 Among the auditors, one whose conscience tells him
 He is of the same mould, we cannot help it.
 Or, bringing on the stage a loose adulteress, 115
 That does maintain the riotous expense
 Of him that feeds her greedy lust, yet suffers
 The lawful pledges²³ of a former bed
 To starve the while for hunger; if a matron,
 However great in fortune, birth, or titles, 120
 Guilty of such a foul unnatural sin,
 Cry out, 'Tis writ by me',²⁴ we cannot help it.
 Or, when a covetous man's expressed, whose wealth
 Arithmetic cannot number, and whose lordships*
 A falcon in one day cannot fly over; 125
 Yet he so sordid in his mind, so griping,
 As not to afford himself the necessaries
 To maintain life;²⁵ if a patrician—
 Though honoured with a consulship—find himself
 Touched to the quick in this, we cannot help it. 130
 Or, when we show a judge that is corrupt,

²¹ Cf. Sidney, p. 356. ²² As for. ²³ Legitimate children.

²⁴ 'Written about me'.

²⁵ Massinger inserts three plays within this play, the first of which (2. 1. 1-111, 161-70, 263-446) being *The Cure for Avarice*, a play (based on Horace, *Sat.* 2. 3. 108-26, 142-57) put on by Paris and his company at the request of Parthenius, in an attempt to cure his father Philargus, a rich miser, who grudges to spend money on clothes and food. The play failing in its goal, Domitian has Philargus hanged. The emperor subsequently executes Paris for his alleged affair with Domitia.

And will give up his sentence as he favours
 The person, not the cause; saving the guilty,
 If of his faction, and as oft condemning
 The innocent, out of particular spleen;²⁶ 135
 If any in this reverend assembly,
 Nay, e'en yourself, my lord, that are the image
 Of absent Caesar, feel something in your bosom
 That puts you in remembrance of things past,
 Or things intended, 'tis not in us to help it. 140
 I have said, my lord; and now, as you find cause,
 Or censure us or free us with applause.

LATINUS. Well pleaded, on my life! I never saw him
 Act an orator's part before.

AESOPUS. We might have given
 Ten double fees to Regulus,²⁷ and yet 145
 Our cause delivered worse.

²⁶ Partisan ill-will. ²⁷ A celebrated defence lawyer, and informer.