

The Roman actor, metadrama, authority, and
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The Roman Actor, Metadrama, Authority, and the Audience

Bill Angus

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Abstract

Early modern debate about the legitimacy of theater concerns the question of the author's authority in relation to that of the licensing authorities and their informers. Here the fear of misinterpretation generates a self-conscious metadrama, which expresses the ambiguity of authority in dramatic structures that aim to manipulate audiences' responses. Moreover, this metadrama acknowledges theater's own potential for complicity in social control and is often concerned with the interchangeability of authority figures, informers, and author-actors. These tensions and interconnections are embodied in the metadramatic representations of the tyrannous court of Caesar in Philip Massinger's *The Roman Actor*.

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BILL ANGUS

In early modern England, debate about the legitimacy of theater is part of a wider postreformation discourse about the nature of authority in general. In terms of theatrical control this especially concerns the question of the author's authority in relation to that of the interpretations of the licensing authorities and their informers. The danger inherent in dramatic authorship at this time may be best exemplified by the prison experiences of authors such as Ben Jonson, whose concern to establish the social role of the satirist as a Horatian ideal is an example of resulting preoccupations with authority.¹ In this intimidating political milieu, the fear of misinterpretation, deliberate or otherwise, tends to generate self-conscious drama, which expresses these issues of theater and ambiguous authority in its content or form.

Thus, metadrama is widespread at this time not only in dialogue, character, and plot but also in a range of dramatic structures that aim to manipulate or to define the parameters of audiences' perspectives, interpretations, and responses. Such metadrama has a dual nature: it posits a fictionally displaced authorship, more easily safeguarded from allegations of false or damaging representation, while also registering in its forms the very structures of hidden watching, eavesdropping, and tale-bearing that constitute the social problem it identifies. It is with these preoccupations that Philip Massinger's *The Roman Actor* begins.

Critical readings of this play have typically focused on the issue of theatrical restriction and autonomy, and in this vein David A. Reinheimer cogently identifies "a condemnation of the practice

Bill Angus is a visiting lecturer in English at the University of Buckingham.



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Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
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