

# Reynolds's News and Miscellany

HISTORY, LITERATURE, POETRY, AND LITERARY CRITICISM

Page |  
1

4 October 2026

## John Fletcher's *The Faithful Shepherdess* (c.1608)

Stephen Basdeo

**SUMMARY:** John Fletcher's *The Faithful Shepherdess*, first performed around 1608, was rejected by its audience but later recognised as a work of English pastoral drama. Combining tragedy, comedy, and pastoral, Fletcher creates the form he called tragicomedy, investing shepherds with the poetic dignity and moral seriousness reserved for kings and heroes. The play centres upon fidelity. Clorin remains devoted to her dead lover, while Amoret endures deception, accusation, and violence without abandoning Perigot. Fletcher's Arcadia is no innocent paradise: Amarillis uses magic to assume Amoret's appearance, Perigot twice wounds Amoret, and the Sullen Shepherd seeks to corrupt the community. Nevertheless, tragedy is averted through healing, repentance, and pardon. Perigot and Amarillis are restored because they acknowledge their wrongdoing, whereas the Sullen Shepherd is expelled. The community survives not by being free from wrongdoing, but through its capacity to heal injury, reward constancy, forgive the penitent, and exclude those who make reconciliation impossible.

\*

"Muse, tell me about Pan, the dear son of Hermes, with his goats feet and two horns—a lover of merry noise. Through wooded glades he wanders with dancing nymph who [...] he has every snowy height and the mountain peaks and rocky crest for his domain; hither and thither he goes through the close thickets, now living by soft streams, and now he presses on amongst towering crags and climbs to the highest peaks that overlook the flocks."

——, Homer, *Homeric Hymn to Pan*.<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

"Certain periods of British history," wrote John S. Keltie (1840–1927), "have been marked by the prevalence of particular forms of literature."<sup>2</sup> As that great Victorian scholar proceeded to say, the nineteenth century was the age of the novel in which great moral and social questions received their elucidation and manifestation on the printed page. The eighteenth century was that of the periodical essay. The late Elizabethan and Jacobean periods

<sup>1</sup> H. G. Evelyn-White, trans., *Hesiod: Homeric Hymns and Homeric Apocrypha*. Loeb Classical Library, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> John S. Keltie, 'Preface', in *The Works of the British Dramatists*, ed. by John S. Keltie (Edinburgh: Nimmo, 1875), pp. v–xiii (p. v). For a biography of Keltie, who was both a literary critic, popular science writer, and editor of *Nature*, see the following: 'Obituary', *The Times*, 13 January 1927, p. 8.

were the age of the drama. It was an age in which “hundreds of dramas, many of them of supreme excellence, laden with deep and striking thoughts as well as rich and exquisite fancies, were produced by a race of authors, many of the greatest of whom almost all we know is their names.”<sup>3</sup> The student of early modern drama will, of course, know the names of this “race of authors.” That of William Shakespeare will be foremost in their minds when the term “Jacobean drama” is uttered. Other playwrights there were too, whose names can be added to the pantheon of dramatic authors in which Shakespeare has pride of place, such as Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, George Peele, Robert Greene, and Anthony Munday.

It is the name of another man that concerns us here: one who came to prominence slightly later than those already mentioned. For in 1608, the work of a young and theretofore relatively unknown playwright named John Fletcher appeared on the London stage. Titled *The Faithful Shepherdess*, it was a tale of grief and loss, fidelity and infidelity, belonging and exclusion set in a seemingly Arcadian world peopled only by shepherds and shepherdesses.

### ***ENTER JOHN FLETCHER AND FRANCIS BEAUMONT***

Unfortunately for our young playwright Mr Fletcher, the theatre-going public’s reception of *The Faithful Shepherdess* was less than enthusiastic. As Fletcher later wrote:

This play was never liked, unless by few  
That brought their judgments with ‘em; for, of late,  
First the infection, then the common prate  
Of common people have such customs got,  
Either to silence plays or like them not.<sup>4</sup>

But it was not only audiences who “silenced” the play. Fletcher’s subsequent remarks suggest that the memory of audiences’ lukewarm reception of his play in 1608 stayed with him. A quarto of the play was published in 1610.<sup>5</sup> Thereafter Fletcher laid the work aside, and the play never saw the light of day either in print or on the stage until 1629.<sup>6</sup>

In the meantime, Fletcher reached the heights of fame on the Jacobean stage. In 1606, he formed a long-lasting friendship with a playwright named Francis Beaumont.<sup>7</sup> One year later their first co-authored play appeared on stage. Titled the *Woman Hater*, it was, in the words of Shakespeare critic Darren Freebury-Jones, “a hilarious comedy [...] in which a prized fish causes mayhem in Milan.”<sup>8</sup>

Beaumont was born in Grace Dieu (now Thringstone) in Leicestershire in 1586. At the age of 10 he was enrolled as a “gentleman commoner” at Broadgate Hall (now Pembroke College) at the University of Oxford where he would have received the standard classical education of the time.<sup>9</sup> Although he was initially destined for a career in law, by all accounts he did not apply himself fully to his legal studies, preferring writing to reading dusty old statutes. The pair, collectively known as “Beaumont and Fletcher,” were frequent collaborators and perhaps

<sup>3</sup> Keltie, ‘Preface’, p. vi.

<sup>4</sup> John Fletcher, ‘To that Noble and True Lover of Learning Sir Walter Aston’, in *Beaumont and Fletcher: Select Plays*, ed. by M. C. Bradbrook (London: Everyman, 1911), p. 239.

<sup>5</sup> See John Fletcher, *The Faithfull Shepheardesse* (London: Edward Allde, 1610), London, British Library [Main Catalogue].

<sup>6</sup> George Colman, ‘[Introduction to] The Faithful Shepherdess’, in *The Dramatic Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*, ed. by George Colman, 3 vols (London: John Stockdale, 1811), I, p. 374.

<sup>7</sup> Darren Freebury-Jones, *Shakespeare’s Borrowed Feathers: How Early Modern Playwrights Shaped the World’s Greatest Writer* (Manchester University Press, 2024), p. 180.

<sup>8</sup> Freebury-Jones, *Shakespeare’s Borrowed Feathers*, p. 180.

<sup>9</sup> George Colman, ‘Life of Francis Beaumont’, in *The Dramatic Works of Beaumont and Fletcher: Printed from the Text and with the notes of the Late George Colman*, ed. by George Colman, 3 vols (London: John Stockdale, 1811), I, p. 5.

even lovers.<sup>10</sup> The closeness of their relationship was alluded to even by a contemporary of theirs, Humphrey Moseley, who stated that they were “never parted while they lived.”<sup>11</sup> The antiquary John Aubrey said that they “lived together on the Bankside, not far from the playhouse [with] one wench between them, which they did so admire; the same cloathes and cloake, &c., between them.”<sup>12</sup> Whatever the precise nature of their relationship, either as friends or as lovers, their partnership was a successful one and together they wrote many fine dramatic works.<sup>13</sup> At other times they wrote independently or collaborated with others. Beaumont, for instance, wrote a fine court masque titled *The Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray’s Inn, of Gray’s Inn and the Inner Temple* (1613).<sup>14</sup> The brilliant *Bonduca* (c.1609) was the work of Fletcher alone.<sup>15</sup> Fletcher then collaborated with Shakespeare on *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (c.1613) and *Henry VIII or, All is True* (c.1612).<sup>16</sup> With Philip Massinger, Fletcher wrote, among other things, *The Tragedy of Sir John van Olden Barnavelt*.<sup>17</sup>

Despite Fletcher’s subsequent successes, *The Faithful Shepherdess* languished unseen by audiences and critics after its unhappy reception in 1608. Fletcher then passed away in 1625. He would never know that his play, once rejected by audiences, would see the light of day again, although the circumstances attending its revival were very different from those of its original publication and performance. A new quarto of the play was published in 1629 in which this once-ridiculed dramatic piece was now described as “a glorified worke.” The man who described it thus was no mere literary hack but one of the era’s most celebrated dramatists, Ben Jonson, who addressed the deceased Fletcher in the following terms:

To the Worthy Author M. John Fletcher.

The wise, and many-headed *Bench*; that sits  
Upon the Life, and Death of *Playes*, and *Wits*,  
(Compos’d of *Gamester*, *Captaine*, *Knight*, *Knight’s man*,  
*Lady*, or *Pusil*, that weares maske, or fan,  
*Velvet*, or *Taffata* cap, rank’d in the darke  
With the shops *Foreman*, or some such *brave sparke*,  
That may iudge for his *six-pence*) had, before  
They saw it halfe, dam’d thy whole play, and more,  
Their motiues were, since it had not to doe  
With vices, which they look’d for, and came to.  
I, that am glad, thy Innocence was thy Guilt,  
And wish that all the *Muses* blood were spilt,  
In such a *Martyrdome*; To vexe their eyes,  
Do crowne thy mured *Poeme*: which shall rise

<sup>10</sup> Rictor Norton [online], ‘The Gay Guide to Westminster Abbey’, <https://rictornorton.co.uk/westmin.htm> accessed 22/12/2024

<sup>11</sup> Lois Potter, ‘Introduction’, in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, ed. by Lois Potter, The Arden Shakespeare, rev. ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Freebury-Jones, *Shakespeare’s Borrowed Feathers*, p. 180.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Preface, 1711’, in *The Dramatic Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*, I, p. xv.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Basdeo, ‘Francis Beaumont’s “Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray’s Inn” (1613)’, *Reynolds’s News and Miscellany*, 6 August 2025 <https://reynolds-news.com/2025/08/06/francis-beaumont-masque-inner-temple-grays-inn-stephen-basdeo/> [accessed 20 August 2026].

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Basdeo, ‘John Fletcher’s “Tragedy of Bonduca” (c.1609)’, *Reynolds’s News and Miscellany*, 26 December 2024 <https://reynolds-news.com/2024/12/26/john-fletcher-bonduca-stephen-basdeo/> [accessed 20 August 2026].

<sup>16</sup> Freebury-Jones, *Shakespeare’s Borrowed Feathers*, p. 185: “Fletcher was first proposed as Shakespeare’s co-author on *All is True* during the Victorian period, and no serious Shakespearian questions the overwhelming evidence today.”

<sup>17</sup> Colman, ‘Life of John Fletcher’, in *Dramatic Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*, I, p. 8. On collaboration with Shakespeare see also Potter, ‘Introduction’, pp. 18–27. An edition of the Massinger collaboration can be found in the following place: John Fletcher and Philip Massinger, *Sir John van Olden Barnavelt*, ed. by T. H. Howard-Hill (London: Malone Society, 1980).

A glorified worke to Time, when Fire,  
or moathes shall eate, what all these Fooles admire.<sup>18</sup>

### ***THE FUSION OF TRAGEDY AND COMEDY; OR, “TRAGICOMEDY”***

In his address “To the Reader,” Fletcher tells us that his play “is a pastoral tragicomedy.”<sup>19</sup> As such, it crosses three genres: the pastoral, tragedy, and comedy. It is worth diverting our attention to the meaning of these terms for they illuminate the themes that Fletcher brought forth in his play. Keltie, with all the elegance of a learned Victorian scholar, provides us with an equally elegant definition of tragedy and comedy:

“Tragedy, in its best form, concerns itself with the deepest, noblest, most earnest side of man’s nature, striving to elicit our strongest sympathy in behalf of others who are vividly represented before us as actually taking part in certain scenes of life which bring upon them sorrow and suffering [... it] shows us man, if we may so speak, in the ‘struggle for existence,’ fighting fate against fate, striving to hold his own against unfeeling nature and man’s inhumanity.”<sup>20</sup>

In “A Defence of Poetry,” Percy Bysshe Shelley went one step further in outlining the moral effects that tragedy can have upon us:

“The imagination is enlarged by a sympathy with pains and passions so mighty, that they distend in their conception the capacity of that by which they are conceived; the good affections are strengthened by pity, indignation, terror, and sorrow; and an exalted calm is prolonged from the satiety of this high exercise of them into the tumult of familiar life: even crime is disarmed of half its horror and all its contagion by being represented as the fatal consequence of the unfathomable agencies of nature; error is thus divested of its wilfulness; men can no longer cherish it as the creation of their choice.”<sup>21</sup>

Some of the finest works of English drama occupy the status of tragedy. Who cannot but be moved by seeing the young Hamlet, returned from overseas to a home life vastly changed—a dead father, an unfaithful mother, and a usurping uncle? Or the conquered Bonduca in Fletcher’s eponymous tragedy, whose forlorn fight to free her people ends with her lonely death by suicide?<sup>22</sup> It matters not that Hamlet is a Danish prince, that Bonduca is a British queen, or that Lear is an ancient British king discovering that he has mistreated or neglected his family and his subjects. Instead, we see through the “thin disguise.” We do not have to like the characters. Lear can be vain, rash and culpable; Bonduca can be ferocious; Hamlet can behave appallingly. But we *feel* with the characters. The imaginative act strips away enough of the circumstance that we recognise something of ourselves, or something we *might* be, in them.

---

<sup>18</sup> John Fletcher, *The Faithfull Shepheardesse* (London: Thomas Coates, 1629), A. 3. San Marino, CA, Huntington Library, 60519  
<sup>19</sup> John Fletcher, ‘The Faithful Shepherdess’, in *Beaumont and Fletcher: Select Plays*, ed. by M. C. Bradbrook (London: Everyman, 1911), p. 242.

<sup>20</sup> John S. Keltie, ‘Origin and Early History of the British Drama’, in *The Works of the British Dramatists*, ed. by John S. Keltie (Edinburgh: Nimmo, 1875), pp. ix–lvi (p. ix).

<sup>21</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘A Defence of Poetry’, *Poetry Foundation*, 13 October 2009

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69388/a-defence-of-poetry> [accessed 4 October 2026].

<sup>22</sup> John Fletcher, ‘The Tragedy of Bonduca’, in *Beaumont and Fletcher: Select Plays*, ed. by M. C. Bradbrook (London: Everyman, 1911), pp. 389–466 (p. 450).

“Comedy, on the other hand,” said Keltie, “deals with the ordinary commonplace events of everyday life, and ministers to the amusement of the spectator by exhibiting the ludicrous mistakes and follies of his fellow men.”<sup>23</sup> Fletcher was no stranger to this genre either. Fletcher’s sequel to Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, titled *The Woman’s Prize* (appearing in the first Beaumont and Fletcher folio of 1647), introduced audiences to the widower Petruchio who, upon remarrying, finds that his new wife is not as meek and mild and easily dominated as his first.

The boundaries of the two genres, however, are never so strict as critical definitions would have us believe. Fletcher himself would not confine himself to one mode alone. He defined his *Faithful Shepherdess* as a “tragicomedy.” Tragicomedy, in its popular definition, is supposed to contain moments of great suffering and death but lightens the load by placing moments of mirth.<sup>24</sup> The fusion of the two genres stretches as far back as Ancient Greece.<sup>25</sup> Fletcher, however, would have rejected this conception for he provided his own critical definition of the tragicomic mode in his address to the reader:

“A tragi-comedy is not so called in respect of mirth and killing, but in respect it wants deaths, which is enough to make it no tragedy, yet brings some near it, which is enough to make it no comedy, which must be a representation of familiar people, with such kind of trouble as no life be questioned; so that a god is as lawful in this as in a tragedy, and mean people as in a comedy.”<sup>26</sup>

In Fletcher’s conception of a tragicomedy, people can come near to death, but that death—which, if enacted onstage, might constitute a tragedy—never occurs. There is also a social dimension to Fletcher’s generic ideas. Tragedy had typically featured kings, nobles, heroes, even gods, undergoing suffering while comedy was preserved for the representation of common folk. Fletcher’s blending of the two modes, however, allowed him to represent the concerns of commoners with the moral seriousness of a tragedy. The tragicomical mode essentially democratises tragic seriousness.

By Fletcher’s time, blank verse had become the favoured medium of English tragedy and was conventionally associated with elevated dramatic speech;<sup>27</sup> verse tended to be allotted to noble characters while prose was associated with those of lower social rank. Fletcher’s shepherds therefore speak in a poetic form whose dramatic associations exceed their humble social station. Fletcher does not merely allow his “mean people” to experience troubles approaching those of tragedy; he gives their passions and sufferings an elevated poetic form in which to be expressed.

## THE PASTORAL

It is the representation of the “mean people,” or ordinary folk, represented in Fletcher’s play, who bring us to a discussion of the third genre that Fletcher fuses with tragedy and comedy: the pastoral. Deriving from the Latin word *pastor*, meaning “shepherd,” the pastoral imagination was born in Ancient Greece, in a remote region of mountains and plains, called Arcadia.<sup>28</sup> The region was not filled with heroes and hoplites but was a land of

<sup>23</sup> Keltie, ‘Origin and Early History of the British Drama’, p. ix.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Tragicomedy: Definition and Examples of Tragicomedy’, *Literary Devices: Definition and Examples of Literary Terms* <https://literarydevices.net/tragicomedy/> [accessed 20 August 2026]

<sup>25</sup> Freebury-Jones, *Shakespeare’s Borrowed Feathers*, p. 181.

<sup>26</sup> Fletcher, ‘The Faithful Shepherdess’, p. 242.

<sup>27</sup> On blank verse and the English drama see Alexander Christensen, ‘Shakespeare and Plautus: exploring metrical influence’, *Classical Reception Journal*, 15: 3 (2023), pp. 298–318, <https://doi.org/10.1093/crj/clad010>

<sup>28</sup> Allan R. Ruff, *Arcadian Visions: Pastoral Influences on Poetry, Painting and the Design of Landscape* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2015), p. 1.

Hunters and gathers, warriors and sensualists, inhabiting a landscape, notorious for its brutal harshness [...] Arcadians were believed to dwell in caves or crude shelters subsisting on acorns and the meat and milk of their goats. The presiding divinity of Arcadia was Pan, half man, half goat with woolly thighs and cloven feet, who could appear at any place and at any time. He was the god of the shepherds and their flocks, fields, and the wooded glens of Arcadia.<sup>29</sup>

Remaining true to the classical ideal of the pastoral, Fletcher set his play in Thessaly, Greece. His Thessalian Arcadians' entertainments were simple. Pipes and other rude instruments supplied their music. Their woodland melodies were even said to be capable of "bewitch[ing] the hearer into states pan-ic or pan-demonium."<sup>30</sup> In time, poets such as Homer idealised this simpler shepherd life. Theocritus, in his *Idylls*, represented such an existence as *idyllic*.<sup>31</sup> In the Roman period, Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics* circulated widely and his ideas were adapted by the likes of Calpurnius Siculus and Nemesianus.

The popularity of the pastoral declined during the Middle Ages. Christian writers sometimes deferred to Virgil for inspiration of a purer, simpler, pre-Fall world. But, and here we might defer to "traditional" historiographical boundaries of periodisation, it was not until the "rediscovery" of classical writers during the Renaissance that there was a flowering of new pastoral poetry in Europe.<sup>32</sup> The man who led the charge in resurrecting the pastoral was Petrarch, who reconciled Christian faith and the pagan pastoral, for he "regarded worldly and classical beauty as reflections of the divine."<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, the pastoral was, for many writers, envisaged almost a "second Eden."<sup>34</sup>

The pastoral thrived in England. One of the most highly esteemed poets of the sixteenth century, Edmund Spenser, published *The Shepherds Calendar*; Michael Drayton published *The Shepherds Garland*; and playwrights such as Shakespeare included pastoral scenes in their plays.<sup>35</sup> The staging of a pastoral in the early seventeenth century, then, was hardly an innovation.<sup>36</sup> The enthusiasm with which poets and playwrights, and their audiences, took to the pastoral makes audiences' initial rejection of Fletcher's *Faithful Shepherdess* more remarkable.

For the pastoral, as with tragicomedy, Fletcher supplied his own definition:

"Understand, therefore, a pastoral to be a representation of shepherds and shepherdesses with their actions and passions which must be such as may agree with their natures, at least not exceeding former fictions and vulgar traditions; they are not to be adorned with any art, but such improper ones as nature is said to bestow, as singing and poetry; or such as experience may teach them, as the virtues of herbs, and fountains, and the ordinary course of the sun, moon, and stars and such like."<sup>37</sup>

The pastoral world was a simpler world. By this Fletcher meant that, in terms of its social makeup and its entertainments, it was less refined and more natural than those that might be depicted in a play about the court.

<sup>29</sup> Ruff, *Arcadian Visions*, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 526.

<sup>31</sup> Ruff, *Arcadian Visions*, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Katherine C. Little, *Transforming Work: Early Modern Pastoral and Late Medieval Poetry* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), pp. 15–48.

<sup>33</sup> Ruff, *Arcadian Visions*, p. 27.

<sup>34</sup> Heather Dubrow, 'Lyric Forms', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1500–1600* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 195.

<sup>35</sup> Sukanta Chaudhuri, 'Introduction', in *Pastoral poetry of the English Renaissance: An anthology*, ed. by Sukanta Chaudhuri (Manchester University Press, 2016), p. xxii.

<sup>36</sup> Marco Mincoff, 'The Faithful Shepherdess: A Fletcherian Experiment', *Renaissance Drama*, 9 (1966), pp 163–177 (p. 165).

<sup>37</sup> Fletcher, 'The Faithful Shepherdess', p. 242.

That the virtues of the Arcadian inhabitants are *supposed* to excel those of the towns is expressly wished for by one of the play's principal protagonists, Amoret, who wishes that her lover be

As he whose conversation never knew  
The court or city; be thou ever true! (1.2)<sup>38</sup>

Page |  
7

The Thessalian Arcadia of Fletcher's play, however, is not a hedonistic place of unbounded licence. It is a place that has a strict moral code designed to promote virtue among members of its community. The shepherd community is, first and foremost, required to pay heed to the moral and ethical code set down by Pan, as communicated through the character of the Priest of Pan. The shepherds have a duty to their flock and should never leave their sheep alone to follow impure desires, as evinced by the priest's admonition to the Old Shepherd:

Dost thou not blush, young shepherd, to be known  
Thus without care leaving thy flocks alone,  
And following what desire and present blood  
Shapes out before thy burning sense for good;  
Having forgot what tongue hereafter may  
Tell to the world thy falling off and say  
Thou art regardless both of good and shame. (5.3)

Chastity must be observed by all members of the community. There must be no adultery. If adultery and lust are found among the community, then Pan's favours and blessings will be withdrawn from them. As the priest's words above suggest, and as the play goes on to reveal more fully, there are harsh consequences for those shepherds who do not fulfil their obligations to the community. Yet despite Pan's laws, the liberties they enjoy, and the duties enjoined upon them by the Priest of Pan, the shepherds and shepherdesses still have their passions and follies, their virtues and their lusts. They are human.

### ***FIDELITY AND TRUE LOVE***

As the title of Fletcher's play suggests, the central theme of *The Faithful Shepherdess* is fidelity. At the first performance, the spectators were greeted by a scene of grief: in her woodland bower, Clorin laments the loss of her betrothed while pondering his ashes.

"The truest man that ever fled his flocks  
By the fat plains of fruitful Thessaly!  
Thus I salute thy grave; thus do I pay  
My early vows and tribute of mine eyes  
To thy still-loved ashes; thus I free  
Myself from all ensuing heats and fires  
Of love; all sports, delights, and jolly games,  
That shepherds hold full dear, thus I put off (1.1).

---

<sup>38</sup> Subsequent references to the play are placed in the main text alongside the quotation. Thus "(1.1)" is Act 1, Scene 1, etc.

Lovesickness was conceived of as a very real feeling in the works of early modern dramatists and poets.<sup>39</sup> “Greensleeves,” to take just one example, tells of a forlorn lover who has been “cast off discourteously.”<sup>40</sup> Yet Clorin’s bereavement runs deeper than the feeling of loss that a discarded lover might experience. Her grief convinces her to withdraw from society itself to forever remain beside the ashes of her husband. Clorin’s devotion to her dead husband, and her resolve to remain by the side of her husband’s ashes, is presented as a holy act.

Yet any self-imposed isolation that Clorin might desire is soon interrupted, and it becomes clear, both in the first act and throughout the play, that Clorin can never truly cut herself off from the world. When a satyr comes to her bower carrying fruit and inviting her to the Feast of the Great God Pan to be held that night in the woods, she does not turn him away. Indeed, she tells herself that, as a healer and wise woman, she will always help those in need:

Only remembering what my youth did gain  
In the dark, hidden virtuous use of herbs:  
That I will practise, and as freely give  
All my endeavours as I gained them free  
Of all green wounds I know the remedies  
In men or cattle, be they stung with snakes  
Or charmed with powerful words of wicked art,  
Or be they love-sick, or through too much heat  
Grown wild or lunatic, their eyes or ears  
Thickened with misty film of dulling rheum;  
These I can cure, such secret virtue lies  
In herbs applied by a virgin’s hand (1.1).

Adjoined to the same speech as the lamentation for her betrothed, Clorin’s vow to help others becomes a virtuous and religious act, a way of venerating his memory.

Throughout the play, Clorin’s devotion to her dearly departed is tested by a suitor, Thenot, who, upon learning that Clorin’s husband is dead, decides that it is time to press his own suit. On the pretext of availing himself of Clorin’s medicinal powers, he comes to the bower and says,

“I suffer through disease, no beating vein  
Conveys infection dangerous to the heart,  
No part imposthomed, to be cured by art,  
This body holds; and yet a fuller grief  
Than ever skilful hand did give relief  
Dwells on my soul, and may be healed by you,  
Fair, beauteous virgin (2.2).

Clorin treats her vow to her dead husband as inviolable, however, and reminds Thenot that his very presence on such a pretext in Clorin’s bower is tantamount to an unholy act. Hence she tells him to “repent and go, / Whilst I with prayers appease his ghost below.”

---

<sup>39</sup> Lawrence Babb, ‘The Physiological Conception of Love in the Elizabethan and Early Stuart Drama’, *PMLA*, 56: 4 (1941), pp. 1020-1035 (p. 1026).

<sup>40</sup> ‘A New Courtly Sonnet of the Lady Greensleeves,’ in *Elizabethan Lyrics from the Original Texts*, ed. by Norman Ault, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Longman, 1966), pp. 86–89.

Clorin thus represents the virtue of fidelity, not simply “even unto death,” but beyond death as well. The other leading lady of the play, Amoret, “the fairest bud of maiden virtues” (1.2), is wronged by her fiancé several times throughout the play but remains faithful to him for she is pledged to him. Indeed, Amoret *must* remain faithful to her betrothed for this is the law as set down by the Priest of Pan prior to the feast:

Shepherds, thus I purge away

*[Sprinkling them with water]*

Whatsoever this great day  
Or the past hours, gave not good,  
To corrupt your maiden blood.  
From the high rebellious heat  
Of the grapes, and strength of meat,  
From the wanton quick desires  
They do kindle by their fires  
I do wash you with this water  
Be you pure and fair hereafter!  
[...]  
Nevermore let lustful heat  
Through your purged conduits beat,  
Or a plighted troth be broken,  
Or a wanton verse be spoken  
In a shepherdess's ear:  
Go your ways, ye are all clear (1.2).

Page |  
9

After the priest's purification ceremony, Perigot, “the pride of [the] young grooms,” declares his love for Amoret and, despite initial reservations, she agrees to become Perigot's wife. Clorin's fidelity was memorial; Amoret's is contractual.

Unfortunately for Amoret, there are members of the community who do not take the priest's admonition as seriously Perigot and Amoret. Fletcher introduces a woman who is the antithesis of the chaste and virtuous Amoret. Her name is Amarillis and she desires Perigot:

Then, softly thus: I love thee, Perigot;  
And would be gladder to be loved again  
Than the cold earth is in his frozen arms  
To clip the wanton spring. Nay, do not start,  
Nor wonder that I woo thee; thou that art  
The prime of our young grooms, even the top  
Of all our lusty shepherds (1.2).

Perigot obviously “starts” because Amarillis has spoken a wanton verse to him, which was specifically condemned by the Priest of Pan. But it is all for nought—Perigot rejects Amarillis's advances as he's soon to be joined with Amoret at a time and place appointed by her that evening. Amarillis's disappointment turns to anger. She decides that she will seek out the Sullen Shepherd who delights “in breaking / The holy plighted troths of mutual souls.”

### **WITCHCRAFT, DECEPTION, AND WOUNDING**

Fletcher's Arcadian world is peopled, not only by shepherds, but also by fauns, satyrs, deities. It is also a world where magic can be put to good or ill uses. Amarillis realises that her words will never beguile Perigot and draw him away from his true love, Amoret. The only thing that can break the lovers' bond is witchcraft. The Sullen Shepherd carries her to the holy well, and there utters an incantation that will change Amarillis into Amoret's form:

Snakes that cast your coats anew,  
Chameleons that alter hue,  
Hares that yearly sexes change,  
Proteus altering oft and strange,  
Hecate with shapes three,  
Let this maiden changed be,  
With this holy water wet,  
To the shape of Amoret!  
Cynthia, work thou with my charm!  
Thus I draw thee, free from harm,

*[Draws her out of the well in the shape of Amoret.]*

Up out of this blessed lake:  
Rise both like her and awake! (3.1)

The stage is set for a great deceit to be played upon Perigot and Amoret, and one which goes on to have near fatal consequences for the innocent Amoret. The Sullen Shepherd arrives at the place appointed for Amoret and Perigot's rendezvous. There, he finds Amoret alone and informs her that Perigot is elsewhere and she must go to him:

*Sull. Shep.* But I can tell you news of Perigot:  
An hour together under yonder tree  
He sat with wreathed arms, and called on thee,  
And said, "Why, Amoret, stay'st thou so long?"  
Then starting up, down yonder path he flung,  
Lest thou had missed thy way. Were it daylight,  
He could not yet have born him out of sight.

*Amo.* Thanks, gentle shepherd; and beshrew my stay,  
That made me fearful I had lost my way  
As fast as my weak legs (that cannot be  
Weary with seeking him) will carry me,  
I'll follow, and, for this thy care of me,  
Pray Pan thy love may ever follow thee! (3.1)

Amoret goes to seek Perigot. Perigot and Amarillis in disguise then enter, and Amarillis begins speaking with the object of her desires in a very loose and lustful fashion:

*Amar.* Come, Perigot will show his power, that he  
Can make his Amoret, though she weary be,  
Rise nimbly from her couch, and come to his.

Here, take thy Amoret; embrace and kiss.

*[Lies down beside him.]*

*Peri.* What means my love?

*Amar.* To do as lovers should,  
That are to be enjoyed, not to be wooed.  
There's ne'er a shepherdess in all the plain  
Can kiss thee with more art; there's none can feign  
More wanton tricks.

*Peri.* Forbear, dear soul, to try  
Whether my heart be pure; I'll rather die  
Than nourish one thought to dishonour thee.

*Amar.* Still think'st thou such a thing as chastity  
Is among women? Perigot, there's none  
That with her is in a wood alone,  
And would come home a maid: be not abused  
With thy fond first belief; let time be used [...]

*Peri.* My true heart thou hast slain! [...]  
First, Amoret shall die,  
That is the cause of my eternal smart! (3.1)

Perigot attempts to strike the disguised Amarillis with his spear, and she runs away. The Sullen Shepherd then reads an incantation that changes Amarillis back into her true form.

Then Perigot comes across the real Amoret, who, knowing nothing of his new-found rage towards her, is only too happy to see him. But blind hatred has already spread its empire in Perigot's heart:

*Amo.* Many a weary step, in yonder path,  
Poor hopeless Amoret twice trodden hath,  
To seek her Perigot; yet cannot hear  
His voice.—My Perigot! She loves thee dear  
That calls.

*Peri.* See yonder where she is! How fair  
She shows! And yet her breath infects the air.

*Amo.* My Perigot!

*Peri.* Here.

*Amo.* Happy!

*Peri.* Hapless! First

It lights on thee: the next blow is the worst.

*[Wounds her.*

*Amo.* Stay, Perigot! My love, thou art unjust.

*[Falls.*

*Peri.* Death is the best reward that's due to lust. (3.1)

The entire tragic affair is witnessed by the Sullen Shepherd. Instead of helping her, however, Sullen throws her body down a well lest "some night-traveller, whose honest care / May help to cure her."

### **HEALING AND RECONCILIATION**

The Sullen Shepherd, having cast Amoret's body down the well, leaves the stage. Help is at hand for the faithful shepherdess, however, for the God of the River finds her and takes her back to dry land:

Here's a mortal almost dead,  
Fall'n into my river-head,  
Hallowed so with many a spell,  
That till now none ever fell.  
'Tis a female young and clear,  
Cast in by some ravisher:  
See, upon her breast a wound,  
On which there is no plaster bound.  
Yet, she's warm, her pulses beat,  
'Tis a sign of life and heat.—  
If thou be'st a virgin pure,  
I can give a present cure. (3.1)

Amoret's chastity saves her. The River God's cure, which only works on virgins, works its magic and she slowly awakes to the sound of the River God singing. Thanking the River God for saving her life, Amoret still declares her love for Perigot. "May he prove to thee as true," declares the River God, as Amoret goes on her way.

Yet any reconciliation between Amoret and Perigot is a long time in coming, for he maintains what modern readers might see as an unreasonable and implacable belief in Amoret's unchastity and unfaithfulness. Not even Amarillis, who regrets her crime and goes to see Perigot to confess her shapeshifting machinations, can convince him that Amoret bears no fault. When they next see each other, Amoret confesses her love for Perigot once again but becomes frustrated with his unforgiving behaviour and begins to wonder if he is the unfaithful one, treating her unkindly because he has another lover. In response, Perigot once again wounds Amoret with his spear. As Amoret falls to the ground, she blesses her former lover: "Farewell, and live; be constant to thy friend / That loves thee next."

Hope is at hand once more, however, and the supernatural world intervenes to correct wrongdoing in the natural world. A satyr enters and carries Amoret into Clorin's bower where Clorin and the Satyr exercise their

healing arts to restore her to life. It would not have been possible to heal Amoret had her soul been impure. Clorin and the Satyr can thus assure Perigot, when he enters, of Amoret's fidelity and spur a reconciliation between the two:

*Clo.* Satyr, bring him to the bower:  
We will try the sovereign power  
Of other waters.

Page |  
13

*Sat.* Mortal, sure,  
'Tis the blood of maiden pure  
That stains thee so [...]

*Peri.* Whate'er thou be,  
Be'st thou her sprite, or some divinity,  
That in her shape thinks good to walk this grove,  
Pardon poor Perigot!

*Amo.* I am thy love,  
Thy Amoret, for evermore thy love:  
Strike once more on my naked breast, I'll prove  
As constant still. Oh, couldst thou love me yet,  
How soon could I my former griefs forget!

*Peri.* So over-great with joy that you live, now  
I am, that no desire of knowing how  
Doth seize me. Hast thou still power to forgive?

*Amo.* Whilst thou hast power to love, or I to live. (5.5)

Harmony between the lovers is restored. Amoret has forgiven Perigot (and he was right to beg forgiveness of his betrothed). The lovers are reconciled. Even those guilty of wrongdoing can be reconciled to the community by beseeching the Priest of Pan. Such is the case with Amarillis who repents of her wrongdoing and asks the Priest of Pan to purify her soul once more:

Receive my body, close me up from lust  
That follows at my heels! Be ever just,  
Thou god of shepherds, Pan, for her dear sake  
That loves the rivers' brinks, and still doth shake  
In cold remembrance of thy quick pursuit;  
Let me be made a reed, and, ever mute,  
Nod to the waters' fall, whilst every blast  
Sings through my slender leaves that I was chaste! (5.3)

The Priest of Pan can purify, but only Clorin—who by the end of the play assumes the role of a matriarch—can pardon Amarillis; convinced of her sincerity, she willingly does so.

It is through Clorin's agency and healing powers that the lovers are reconciled. Despite her early wish to completely withdraw from society and devote herself to the memory of her departed lover, her duty to the community means that she can never truly be apart from it. She still has a role to play as a reconciler, pardoner, and healer. Clorin is, therefore, the play's moral centre. Her grief is transformed into public service.

## **RETRIBUTION**

Page |  
14

Clorin and the Priest of Pan are willing to forgive those who break Pan's laws, provided that their desire to reform themselves is sincere. However, there is one member of the community who is beyond redemption: the Sullen Shepherd. He is the unrepentant villain who, even before his conspiracy with Amarillis, delighted "in breaking / The holy plighted troths of mutual souls." After assisting Amarillis with her to divide Amoret and Perigot, he attempts to rape her (4.3). The Sullen Shepherd's actions thus test the limits of the shepherd community's tolerance for wrongdoing and their willingness to reconcile. For this reason, the Priest of Pan delivers an invective against the Sullen Shepherd:

Priest. [Coming Forward.] Monster, stay!  
Thou art like a canker to the state  
Thou liv'st and breath'st in, eating with debate  
Through every honest bosom, forcing still  
The veins of any that may serve thy will (5.3)

Clorin's pardoning of Amarillis proves that redemption is possible. The Sullen Shepherd, whose crimes include attempted rape and deception, might even have been forgiven. But it is instead his attitude that is at fault. If he were permitted to remain in the community, his presence would be a malignant tumour which might spread to others. The Priest of Pan moralises against the Sullen Shepherd, but it is Clorin—the play's moral centre—who passes sentence upon him:

Banish from the chaste  
These manlike monsters; let them never more  
Be known upon these downs, but, long before  
The next sun's rising, put them from the sight  
And memory of every honest wight:  
Be quick in expedition, lest the sores  
Of these weak patients break into new gores. (5.5)

Exclusion from the community is therefore swift and irreversible. There is no right of appeal. The play finishes with a hymn to Pan:

He is great, and he is just,  
He is ever good, and must  
Thus be honoured. Daffadillies,  
Roses, pinks, and loved lillies,  
Let us fling,  
While we sing,  
Ever Holy,  
Ever Holy,

Ever honoured, ever young!  
Thus great Pan is ever sung! (5.5)

## CONCLUSION

*The Faithful Shepherdess* is not simply a tale of virtuous shepherds inhabiting an idyllic Arcadian world. Fletcher's Thessaly is governed by laws and duties, yet those who live there remain susceptible to jealousy, lust, credulity, anger, and revenge. The apparent simplicity of the pastoral life does not free its inhabitants from moral error. Rather, by removing the corrupting influence of the court and city, Fletcher places human passions in clearer relief. His Arcadia becomes a small moral commonwealth whose continued harmony depends upon fidelity, repentance, forgiveness, and, when every hope of reform has disappeared, exclusion.

Fletcher's tragicomic form is essential to this vision. The shepherds and shepherdesses may be "mean people," but their suffering is invested with the seriousness conventionally reserved for kings, queens, and heroes. The tragicomic mode essentially democratises tragic seriousness. Amoret twice approaches death, while Perigot's jealousy carries him to the brink of becoming her murderer. Yet tragedy is repeatedly arrested. The River God, the satyr, and finally Clorin intervene to preserve life and make reconciliation possible. The absence of death is therefore not merely what prevents the play from becoming a tragedy; it expresses Fletcher's moral belief that, while life remains, wrongdoing may still be acknowledged, injuries healed, and broken relationships restored.

Fidelity assumes several forms within the play. Clorin remains faithful to the memory of her departed lover, while Amoret remains faithful to her living but grievously mistaken betrothed. Clorin's fidelity is memorial; Amoret's is contractual. Yet neither woman's constancy is passive. Amoret's fidelity survives deception, accusation, and physical violence, while Clorin transforms private grief into service to others. Having withdrawn to her bower to live beside her lover's ashes, she nevertheless becomes indispensable to the society from which she has sought to retire. She heals the wounded, restores the lovers, pardons the penitent, and finally passes judgment upon the unrepentant. Her fidelity to the dead equips her to heal the living. Clorin is therefore not only a faithful shepherdess but also the play's moral centre.

The fates of Perigot, Amarillis, and the Sullen Shepherd reveal the extent and limits of Fletcher's ideal of reconciliation. Perigot has twice wounded an innocent woman, yet he recognises his error and asks for pardon. Amarillis has conspired to break a "plighted troth," but confesses her wrongdoing, rejects the Sullen Shepherd, and sincerely seeks purification. Both may therefore be restored. The Sullen Shepherd, by contrast, takes pleasure in corrupting others and shows no desire to reform. His offences are grave, but it is his settled malice that finally places him beyond pardon. He has become, in the Priest of Pan's words, a "canker to the state": a corruption which, if allowed to remain, would continue eating through every "honest bosom." His banishment is not an act of arbitrary cruelty but the means by which the community protects those members who remain capable of fidelity and reform.

Fletcher's Arcadia survives, then, not because it is untouched by wrongdoing, but because it possesses the moral resources to respond to it. It can distinguish the mistaken from the malicious, pardon those who repent, heal those who have suffered, and remove those who would make reconciliation impossible. This is what gives *The Faithful Shepherdess* a significance beyond its woodland setting and seemingly simple inhabitants. The passions and sufferings of its shepherds are human passions and sufferings; through them Fletcher asks how any community might preserve its bonds after trust has been violated.

The first audiences who "dam'd" Fletcher's play may not have recognised the seriousness concealed beneath its pastoral form. Ben Jonson did. In crowning his friend's "murdred Poeme" as a "glorified worke," Jonson perceived that *The Faithful Shepherdess* would outlive the judgment of those who had rejected it. Its poetry alone would justify his faith. Yet Fletcher's achievement lies also in the moral world that poetry brings to life: a world wounded by deception and violence, but restored through constancy, mercy, and justice.

