A New Way to Pay Old Debts
A Comedy

Philip Massinger

A New Way to Pay Old Debts was probably written in the mid-1620s; it was entered in the Stationers’ Register on 10 November 1632, and published in quarto in 1633. According to the title page of the first edition, the play ‘hath often been acted at the Phoenix in Drury Lane, by the Queen’s Majesty’s servants’: the company was formed following Charles I’s marriage to Henrietta Maria of France in 1625, and a plague epidemic in London during the summer of that year brought about the closure of the theatres. Its author, Philip Massinger (born 1583) had been part of Philip Henslowe’s stable of playwrights since at least 1613; he had been educated at Salisbury grammar school and Oxford University, but left without completing his degree. Like many of his dramatist colleagues, he spent some of his early career in debtors’ prison, scraping a living by collaborating with, amongst others, John Fletcher, Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, and contributing to over fifty plays during a period of thirty years. From 1615 onwards he worked for the King’s Men, eventually assuming from John Fletcher the mantle of chief dramatist (which Fletcher had inherited from Shakespeare). The performance of New Way by the Queen Majesty’s company was something of an exception in terms of the overall pattern of Massinger’s career, in that from 1626 to 1634 he wrote exclusively for the King’s Men. He died in 1640.
A date of composition of 1625 is also suggested by allusions to the ongoing military campaigns in the Low Countries, which involved English forces in an alliance with the Dutch against Spain, and in possible echoes of the financial misdeeds of the monopolist Sir Giles Mompesson (1584–ca.1651), who has often been seen as the model for Massinger’s Sir Giles Overreach. Mompesson was elected as a Member of Parliament in 1614 and knighted in 1616; in 1617 he acquired the rights of a commissioner and licence-holder. Charged with the responsibility of concocting new sources of revenue for the Crown, Mompesson (aided by his associate, Sir Francis Michell the model for Justice Greedy) turned the office to his own advantage, levying arbitrary and punitive fines on landlords (faintly echoed in the play in Sir Giles’s manipulation of Tapwell), whilst licensing the activities of brothels. He also profited from the patenting of Crown estates. He was investigated by Parliament in 1621, tried in his absence and stripped of his knighthood.

Whether Mompesson was the source for Sir Giles Overreach is open to debate. Although the dramatic creation shares some of the ruthless and corrupt traits of his historical namesake, his is the generic role of the grasping and abusive landlord, who is also the figure of patriarchal opposition to be outwitted by young lovers (it can be noted here that the main plot of New Way is appropriated from Middleton’s A Trick to Catch the Old One [published 1608], which shows an impoverished nephew duping his uncle into restoring his inheritance through the device of a fake marriage). Massinger’s satirical energies are oriented less towards the abuse of office than the violation of class boundaries and hierarchies. The public outrage over Mompesson’s extortions, and the sense of schadenfreude generated by his subsequent exposure and disgrace, were partly fuelled by the sense that his actions were tolerated and even encouraged amidst the general corruption and decadence of the final Jacobean years; Sir Giles Overreach, however, acts solely on his own behalf, targeting not only the poor but, more importantly for the play’s scheme, an increasingly impoverished aristocracy, which he treats with undisguised hatred and contempt. Although he is equipped with a knighthood (probably acquired through corrupt means), Sir Giles is, essentially, a social climber, an aspirant middle-class parvenu who attempts both to expropriate land and to force his daughter into marriage with the aristocratic Lord Lovell. Sir Giles’s rapacity is equalled