

The Knight

of

the

Burning

Pestle

by Francis Beaumont

"The breathtaking virtuosity of Beaumont's writing encompasses a broad range of styles which he mimics and mocks with unerring skill." – Charlotte Loveridge, *Curtain Up London Review*

## A Playgoer's Guide



**Francis Beaumont** (1584–1616) was a dramatist in the English Renaissance theatre, most famous for his collaborations with John Fletcher, which began in 1605. They had both hit an obstacle early in their dramatic careers with notable failures; Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, first performed by the Children of the Blackfriars in 1607, was rejected by an audience who failed to note "the privy mark of irony about it;" that is, they took Beaumont's satire of old-fashioned drama as an old-fashioned drama. The play received a lukewarm reception. The following year, Fletcher's *Faithful*



*Shepherdess* failed on the same stage. In 1609, however, the two collaborated on *Philaster*, which was performed by the King's Men at the Globe Theatre and at Blackfriars. The play was a popular success, not only launching the careers of the two playwrights but also sparking a new taste for tragicomedy. Beaumont and Fletcher went on to replace Shakespeare around 1609 as chief dramatists of the King's Men. [adapted from wikipedia]

### the play

*The Knight of the Burning Pestle* was printed in quarto in 1613. The date of composition is uncertain. It is most likely that the play was written for the child actors at Blackfriars Theatre. In addition to the textual history testifying to a Blackfriar's origin, there are multiple references within the text to Marston, to the actors as children, and other indications that the performance took place in a house known for biting satire and sexual double entendre. Blackfriars specialized in satire. But it has been suggested that the contrast between the youth of the players and the gravity of their roles may have contributed to its failure at its first performances. If written for Blackfriars, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* would have initially been produced in a small private theatre, with minimal stage properties. However, the private theaters were first to introduce the practice of having audience members seated on the stage proper. [from reachinformation.com]

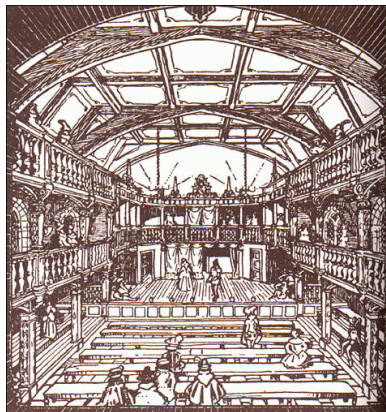
The *Knight* belongs to the genre of “city comedy” or “citizen comedy,” since it deals with regular London citizens rather than kings and heroes. The play-within-the-play, *The London Merchant*, is just such a city comedy, and is also a satire on the work of Beaumont’s fellow playwright Thomas Dekker. Beaumont cleverly intertwines this sub-plot with his sprawling, romantic-heroic main plot, deriving much comedy from the friction between the two styles. The play is laced with verbal wit and cheeky innuendoes. For example, the pronunciation of the word ‘pestle’ in Elizabethan London would have sounded very similar to ‘pizzle’ -- describing the male genitalia. [Young Vic Theatre Company Web site]

## the Blackfriars Theatre

The lesser known of Shakespeare's theaters was the more prestigious in his own time. The Blackfriars Theatre was the name of two separate theatres located in the City of London on the site of a dissolved 13th-century Dominican monastery. The estates of the priory came to be commonly known as "Blackfriars" due to the black vestments of the Dominican monks.

In 1596 in an effort to play to a more sophisticated clientele and have an all weather, nighttime theater, Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, bought part of the old Blackfriars. *The Merchant of Venice* is believed to have been the first play intended for the opening of this new playhouse. However, local residents got an injunction against the theatre being used by an adult troupe and for some years it was only used by children’s troupes.

In 1608, the children's companies fell out of fashion and the company, now known as the King's Men were able to use the theater. Later works by Shakespeare, as well as works by Beaumont and Fletcher, were performed there. [condensed from the Hudson Shakespeare Company Web site]



## what happens

A grocer and his family and servants go to see a play. The playbill announces the show as "The London Merchant," a hackneyed domestic romantic comedy. Certain it will cast aspersions on his profession, the grocer angrily castigates the "Prologue" (narrator), forces his way onto the stage, and (with the backing of popular opinion) establishes himself and his wife as censors of the performance. They constantly interfere with the play, forcing the Players to incorporate a new character; a knight who will uphold the honor of the grocery business and "do valiant deeds." This is the "Knight of the Burning Pestle" of the title. The grocer's apprentice Rafe, who is good at making "pretty speeches," is recruited to portray the knight. The Players attempt to continue acting their original plot, but are continually forced to bring on Rafe, in his new character, whenever the grocer and his wife are bored or offended by the action. [Brian Kunde, Foothills College]

“The most successful of Beaumont’s plays, it is a high-spirited comedy of manners, and a burlesque of knight-errantry . . . it has clear echoes of *Don Quixote*, both in attitude and incident, and satirizes the middle-class taste for . . . popular and improbable romances” – Margaret Drabble, *Oxford Companion to English Literature*

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