

From Womb to Tomb: John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore¹

John Ford's controversial Caroline tragedy wrestles with incest, adultery, murderous revenge, and the corruption of religious power. Set in the Italian city-state of Parma, the story opens on Giovanni, a young intellectual, debating with his mentor and spiritual counselor on the virtues of incestuous romance. Meanwhile, a seemingly never-ending line of suitors stalks Annabella's balcony, seeking attention from the wealthy merchant's daughter. Despite the number of eligible bachelors vying for her hand in marriage, the titular character turns her sights on the one man she cannot marry: her ruminating, cerebral brother, Giovanni. In spite of religious and moral counsel, Annabella and Giovanni pursue their mutually found romantic love, throwing their family and community into upheaval.

Written in the early 1630s for the Queen's Men, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* was first performed at the Cockpit Theatre in Drury Lane. Also known as the Phoenix, the Cockpit was one of London's leading indoor playhouses, designed by famed architect and theatrical visionary, Inigo Jones. Although a contemporary of popular Jacobean playwrights such as Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, Ford's work belongs to a later era. As a second-generation playwright in London's professional theatre scene, well versed in the work of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, Ford's playwrighting recycles theatrical conventions established by his predecessors.

As many scholars have noted, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore's* Annabella and Giovanni echo another ill-fated romance: that of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Simultaneously, the aloof Annabella, pursued by a flock of suitors, hides away in her balcony chamber playfully recalling Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew*; the brooding and intellectual Giovanni is reminiscent of the sable-clad scholar himself, Prince Hamlet of Denmark. The multiple revenge plots that intertwine, driving the play toward its catastrophic conclusion, are each haunted by tropes and conventions established in the many revenge tragedies that preceded *'Tis Pity*. Echoing Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, we arrive in a city corrupted by the ruling class. As in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, a public performance becomes as an opportunity for dramatic vengeance. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* haunts Giovanni's trajectory until its grisly conclusion. Although Ford recycles many conventions, themes, and character archetypes with *'Tis Pity*, the play came under intense criticism throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for its controversial treatment of an incestuous relationship.

'Tis Pity, quite popular in its own time, was briefly revived at the start of the Restoration in 1660; however, Ford's play was quickly deemed unsuitable and inappropriate for public performance. It went unperformed for roughly 250 years, to be taken up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the French avant-garde. Adapted by Maurice Maeterlinck in 1894 and performed by the experimental Théâtre

¹ The title of this essay is borrowed from Rachel Price Cooper's essay, "Womb, Lomb, Tomb: Cloth Production and Maternal Grief in *Riders to the Sea*."

de l'Oeuvre in Paris, the play's true champion would become Antonin Artaud in the twentieth century.

Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' was decidedly anti-literary: "Let us do away with this foolish adherence to texts," he famously proclaimed. "Let dead poets make way for the living."² Despite these scruples, *'Tis Pity* appeared in Artaud's repertoire during the 1930s. The 'cruelty' of Artaud's theatre is art that expresses agonizing, violent truth, which he found in Ford's centuries-old tragedy. Artaud praised Ford's lovers as "falsifiers, hypocrites and liars for the sake of their superhuman passion obstructed, persecuted by the law, but which they place above the law."³ Artaud admired Ford's treatment of Annabella and Giovanni, which he felt to be empty of condemnation or pathology.

Since Artaud, Ford's tragedy has had its own 'renaissance'. Notable productions include Philip Prowse's 1988 staging at the Glasgow Citizens' Theatre, Roland Joffé's 1972 performance at the National Theatre, and Edward Dick's 2005 mounting at the Southwark Playhouse. While these productions were praised for clarity and dramatic concision, in each case this was done at the expense of the play's many subplots. Of Cheek By Jowl's 2012 London production, Michael Billington critiques Declan Donnellan's direction for leaving "the society surrounding the reckless young lovers ... insufficiently defined."⁴ Without these multiple, yet tightly woven, lines of action, Annabella and Giovanni's relationship lacks political, moral, and social context.

For this reason our production keeps the subplots in tact. While many directors have chosen to cut these seemingly ancillary characters who commit adultery and murder while engaging in heinous acts of deception and corruption, Illinois Theatre's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* aims to reveal the ethical complexity of this seventeenth-century text. In favor of Elizabethan grandeur, Ford's play features many nuanced, intimate scenes, serving to establish the world in which Annabella and Giovanni pursue their passion. Set in contemporary, high fashion Italy, lauded Chicago-based director, William Brown, aims to explore the complex ethics and moral ambiguity governing these lovers and their community. In so doing, our production underscores the strikingly contemporary tone of this four-hundred-year-old text.

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² Antonin Artaud, "The Theatre and the Plague", lecture given in 1933, in *Collected Works*, vol. 4 (London: Calder and Boars, 1971), 19.

³ *ibid.*, 18.

⁴ Michael Billington, "'Tis Pity Shes' a Whore Review," *The Guardian*, (London), 22 February 2014.