

# Ford and Against

by Theodore Dalrymple (June 2014)

Until quite recently I had never read John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* though I had always meant to do so, partly (I suspect) on account of its title. But while it is Man that proposes, it is Time that disposes; and it is one of the one of the glories, or at least the consolations, as well as the frustrations, of our human existence that we never have time enough to achieve all our projects and purposes. Imagine what life would be after such complete achievement, how time would stretch before us featureless as oblivion but with the torment of awareness and the awareness of awareness, without any subject except itself to be aware of! No wonder people without projects or purposes go off the rails! At least self-inflicted crises give the illusion of meaning.

Enough of philosophy, as characters say in Russian novels. I finally found time recently to read the play, which was published in 1633, only nine years before the Puritan closure of the theatres. A refrain ran through my mind as I read: 'This is not Shakespeare.' Of course, such a response is absurd on two counts: first Ford wrote the play twenty years after Shakespeare retired from the stage, seventeen years after his death, and no art can stand still; and second, only Shakespeare is Shakespeare. No art can consist only of its supreme achievement, but that does not mean that all else is without value.

Far fewer biographical details are known of Ford than of Shakespeare, for example even the date and manner of his death are matters of conjecture, but no one, as far as I know, has suggested that therefore his later plays must really have been written by George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. True, this theory might stumble on the fact that the Duke was assassinated in 1628, but publication of the later 'Ford' plays might have been held back to protect the Duke from the social ignominy of exposure for having written for the stage; and the fact that the second Duke, born in the year of his father's death, also wrote plays, by which time such writing had increased in social prestige by as much as it had declined in quality, and that literary ambition and talent are often inherited, lends support to our theory.

The work is always more important than the biography, however. The poetry of *'Tis Pity* never rises to Shakespeare's level (Ford's verse was strong and muscular, competent rather than inspired, unmemorable even by those with a good memory for poetry) and it seems to me that the characters are marionettes, always manipulated by the puppet-master rather than acting from inner compulsion, as it were. They are mere instances of some characteristic or other rather

than self-actuated human characters; the plot, in which as high a proportion of characters end up slain as in *Hamlet*, is creakingly contrived. The comedy is lamentable, though not apparently as bad as in his other plays. Ford, then, does not command our willing suspension of disbelief as does Shakespeare.

Of all Ford's works it is only *'Tis Pity* that is ever regularly revived, and then not often: his other works are now but fodder for scholars of Jacobean and Caroline literature, a kind of PhD mine for those intent on an academic career. It is easy to see why *'Tis Pity* is revived, though, for its theme is incestuous love, a subject that is as perennially interesting as it is taboo (indeed, it is interesting *because* it is taboo). And some of the discussion of the morality of sex that it contains is astonishingly modern and apposite to our times – probably to *all* times. Vasques, the servant to Soranzo, one of the main characters, exclaims, 'O horrible! To what a height of liberty in damnation hath the devil turned our age!' Was there ever an age when this could not justly have been exclaimed? Man's conduct always disappoints men, and it always will.

Giovanni and Annabella love each other passionately, sexually, but unfortunately are brother and sister. They consummate their love and continue to do so even as Annabella consents to wed Soranzo in order to wean her from her illicit passion. Just before the wedding feast, Giovanni slays his sister from jealousy and outrage at her 'betrayal' of him. His attitude is that of many a modern jealous murderer who kills: 'If I can't have her, no one else will.'

The play begins *in medias res*. Giovanni is confessing, and trying to justify, his passion to the friar, Bonaventura. The friar has the opening lines:

Dispute no more in this, for know, young man,

These are no school-points; nice philosophy

May tolerate unlikely arguments,

But Heaven admits no jests.

Throughout the play, intermittently, the friar and Giovanni dispute the rightness or otherwise of incest. Giovanni's argument is that the incest taboo is merely customary, a prejudice that would prevent him or cut him off from loving her whom he loves. In the first scene he says:

Shall a peevish sound,

A customary form, from man to man,

Of brother and of sister, be a bar

'Twixt my perpetual happiness and me?

Giovanni argues that, in fact, his love is superior to that of other types because, as brother and sister,

Are we not therefore to each other bound

So much the more by nature? by the links

Of blood, of reason? Nay, if you will have't,

Even of religion, to be ever one,

One soul, one flesh, one love, one heart, one all?

This is Giovanni's intellectualisation of his frustration at society's prohibition of his love which he thinks denies him what we would now, no doubt, call his fundamental human right to love and be loved. 'Must I not do what all men else may, love?' he exclaims, in tones of the most genuine and most universal of all emotions, self-pity.

Giovanni is able to intellectualise his desire because he is a student at Bologna University, and a brilliant one at that (the friar has been his tutor there). The friar says, with all the pain of the teacher disappointed in his prize pupil:

O, Giovanni, hast thou left the schools

Of knowledge to converse with lust and death?

Another of Giovanni's arguments, enunciated later in the play, is the neo-Platonist one, a version of which Keats later summarised and that (taken more seriously or literally than Keats can really have intended) is deeply evil:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Giovanni turns Bonaventura's teaching back on himself, for he later says to him:

What I have done I'll prove both fit and good.

It is a principle (which you have taught  
When I was yet your scholar), that the frame  
And composition of the mind doth follow  
The frame and composition of the body:  
So where the body's furniture is beauty,  
The mind's must needs be virtue; which allowed,  
Virtue itself is reason but refined,  
And love the quintessence of that.

To this Bonaventura can only reply:

O ignorance in knowledge.

In other words, Giovanni's ratiocinations are an instance, a confirmation, of F. H. Bradley's famous (and brilliant) dictum three and a half centuries later, that 'Metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct;' though he added 'but to find these reasons is no less an instinct.' In this case, however, it is not so much what Giovanni wants to *believe* on instinct, but what he wants to *do* on instinct: and I doubt that any of us has never used an abstract argument in this dishonest way.

What does Bonaventura reply to Giovanni, other than expressions of grief? His arguments would cut little ice today, being all from authority: and authority (except our own) is precisely what we are disinclined to obey. In his very first speech, Bonaventura says:

... wits that presumed

On wit too much, by striving how to prove

There was no God, with foolish grounds of art,

Discovered the nearest way to hell...

Better, then, just to accept things as they are:

Such questions, youth, are fond; for better 'tis

To bless the sun than reason why it shines...

As to incest, it is forbidden because it is forbidden by God:

Indeed, if we were sure there is no deity,

Nor Heaven nor hell, then to be led alone

By nature's light (as were philosophers

Of elder times), might instance some defence.

But 'tis not so; then, madman, thou wilt find

That nature is in Heaven's positions blind.

Here is an early exposition of Dostoevsky's view that if God does not exist, everything, including incest, is permitted.

That incest is against God's law is the only argument that Bonaventura offers; he does not venture, as he could not possibly have done at the time, into genetics, arguing that the offspring of consanguineous unions (and Annabella in the play *does* become pregnant by her brother) are much more likely than others to have birth defects – to which argument, in any case, a modern Giovanni might return that the risk is much reduced with modern methods of contraception and ante-natal diagnosis, so that if there is any sin in incest it is that of neglecting precautions either before or after conception.

In his essay about Ford published in 1932, T. S. Eliot asks whether, in his use of brother-sister incest as a theme, Ford was able 'to give universal significance to a perversion of nature which, unlike some other aberrations, is defended by no one.' And he adds that 'The fact that it is defended by no one might, indeed, lend some colour of inoffensiveness to its dramatic use.' Here, it seems to me, Eliot shows his limitations as a social commentator (limitations we all have) for, like J. S. Mill in his *Essay on Liberty*, he shows himself incapable of envisaging a moral sensibility very different from the one regnant at the time of writing. Mill couldn't imagine a sensibility very different from his of a respectable Victorian bourgeois, and Eliot did not foresee the changes that were soon to come. The introduction to my edition of *'Tis Pity* – a cheap one, obviously for the use of university students of English literature, written in 1968 by the Professor of English Literature at the University of Sheffield, ends with these words: 'it [the play] raises poignant social questions for our age, and it may help us to exorcize them with truth.' In other words, in a

space of 36 years only, the permissibility of what was 'a perversion of nature... defended by no one' had become a real question. And the most obvious explanation of why this should have been so is the vast increase in tertiary education that had happened in the intervening period, and a corresponding increase in the means of disseminating a questioning attitude to everything.

It is no coincidence that Giovanni should have been a student at Bologna University – one of the most celebrated of the time – and that there he should have learned the kind of sophistry that turns a man into his own moral authority, who accepts nothing that he cannot prove and then finds that there is nothing that he cannot prove, so that desire becomes truth.

In the play Annabella has a 'tut'ress' who plays more or less the part of the Nurse in Romeo and Juliet, whose name (Ford sometimes lacked subtlety) is Putana. When Annabella, who loves or lusts after her brother in a fully reciprocal fashion, dithers about whether it was morally permissible to have consummated her love, Putana, earthy and without intellectualisation, says that desire is its own justification:

Your brother's a man, I hope, and I say still, if a young wench

feel the fit upon her, let her take anybody, father or brother, all

is one.

It takes education, however, to turn this attitude into a matter doctrine, and to believe that every principle that one has inherited and not derived from one's own supposedly unaided thinking is but 'a peevish sound, a customary form.'

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**Theodore Dalrymple's** latest book is