



## 'Tis Pity She's a Whore and Other Plays

*John Ford, Marion Lomax (Editor)*

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Ford wrote darkly about sexual and political passion, thwarted ambition, and incest. This selection of four plays also shows his ability to portray the poignancy of love as well as write entertaining comedy and create convincing roles for women. Setting Ford's earliest surviving independently written play, *The Lover's Melancholy*, alongside his three best-known works, *The Broken Heart*, *'Tis a Pity She's a Whore*, and *Perkin Warbeck*, this edition includes an introduction with sections on each play, addressing gender issues, modern relevance, and staging possibilities.

## 'Tis Pity She's a Whore and Other Plays Details

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## **From Reader Review 'Tis Pity She's a Whore and Other Plays for online ebook**

### **Roman Clodia says**

Writing in the 1620s, well after Shakespeare and Marlowe, John Ford is now little read and rarely produced. Which is a shame as his plays have a dramatic power and tension that recall some of the gothic barbarity of Webster, though in much simpler language.

The highlight of this collection is 'Tis Pity She's a Whore: set in Italy, it tells the story of incestuous love between Giovanni and Annabella, brother and sister, and the sexual jealousy that ensues when she is forced into marriage. Stark, dark and bloody, this builds to a predictable but still shockingly visual climax.

With intertextual references to Romeo and Juliet, Othello, and classical literature such as Ovid's Metamorphoses, this weaves its own taut and tense spell over the reader. Short but memorable.

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### **Dray says**

...the fuck did I just read??

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### **Janice says**

Read this for a "tragedy in drama" class in college. Lots of innuendos - gloves being dropped so they can be placed back on their hands. ;)

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### **Benjamin Smith says**

Look, you see a title like that... You know you have to read the play. You just have to!

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### **James Violand says**

John Ford had not an atom of morality. Today, while ethical standards are disappearing, we see his resurrection from a well-merited obscurity. Ford had to struggle in the shadow of Shakespeare. If only he had fallen into his warranted abyss! Instead, he is heralded by an aficionado of antiquated perversity and exposed to the limelight. If you read him, you must endure debauchery and suspend any reference to decent human behavior. Perhaps there is a hidden agenda behind the editor's praise.

The Lover's Melancholy

Background before the play begins: king of Cyprus attempts to rape his son's intended, she flees, her chancellor father is imprisoned to prevent disclosure, and the king dies. Play begins. New prince depressed because his love has been missing for two years. (But, he never tried to discover her where-abouts.) She

assumes the aspect of a boy and returns to Cyprus. Various members of royalty pursue unrequited love. Daughter announces return to prince. Joy ensues. So?

### The Broken Heart

Sparta. Somehow Ford ignores the historical notoriety of its two king system. A hero's twin sister, promised to her lover-since-childhood (the protagonist - also the hero's best friend) winds up married to a buffoon at the hero's insistence. The heart-sick protagonist retreats to Athens to be tutored by a philosopher. He returns in disguise to Sparta. The hero confesses love to the affianced only child of the king and his love is reciprocated even though the princess is promised in marriage to the king of Argos. The protagonist confronts the hero with his betrayal and the hero confesses his guilt. Meanwhile, the hero's sister starves herself to death because she can't love the protagonist. The protagonist traps the hero in a chair – no kidding, a chair – and stabs him to death. The king dies; the princess becomes queen, orders the death of the protagonist, doesn't want to live without the warrior and kills herself after making sure Sparta is handed over to Argos. Makes sense doesn't it?

### 'Tis Pity She's a Whore

Ford's most famous drama is the vilest play I have ever read. Incest between a brother and sister, a vengeful adulterous wife betrayed and abandoned by her ex-lover, a loyal maid's eyes gouged out and nose slit by the ex-lover's servant, the marriage of the sister with the traitor, disembowelment of the sister by the brother, violent deaths by assassins and the most foul character escapes by a Cardinal's complicit mercy. Coupled with the editor's continuous, unwarranted disparagement of the Church in the introduction and the footnotes, this play reflects poorly on today's state of drama-appreciation.

### Perkin Warbeck

An impostor to the English throne convinces King James of Scotland to join him in fighting Henry VII. Warbeck marries the daughter of a Scottish Lord who harbors resentment at the match made by James. This is so insipid a play that I need not go on. Ford has a habit of promoting the abnormal as blessed. Known to history as a traitorous scoundrel, Warbeck is painted with a revisionist's brush. It would be as though some half-witted modern playwright ennobled Aaron Burr.

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### Lauren says

I read the DigiReads.com edition of these plays, and while I liked the larger format (decent-sized text, good space, and plenty of room for notes – not something frequently found in editions of English Renaissance plays), the lack of notes and historical detail for the plays, in addition to the number of typos, makes me wish I had opted for the Oxford edition. It's enough of a challenge to read early seventeenth-century plays without having to figure out if a word is simply out of use or a typo.

But on with the plays:

### The Lover's Melancholy

Thank goodness for Wikipedia. Given the sheer amount of backstory, I would have been tremendously confused if not for the brief summary posted on Wikipedia. *The Lover's Melancholy* is a bit *Twelfth Night: The Prozac Edition*, with depression, women dressing as men (and men as women, in one of the comedic subplots), and star-crossed lovers. It's a decent play, but not one that I'll be disappointed if I never see live. All in all, it reads like a lesser imitation of some of Shakespeare's best works (perhaps explaining later

rumors that Ford stole the play from Shakespeare's papers).

### The Broken Heart

This feels like a different author wrote this play. The plot, the characters, the story – all are leagues stronger than *Melancholy*. This, again, is drama with a capital D. There are some great character arcs, and I especially like the prevalence of interesting female characters. Penthea is a tragic character, and I'm honestly surprised the play isn't better known for the simple reason that Penthea would be such a fascinating character to play. My one caveat is there isn't one strong, overarching plot. Rather, this is a play with a unifying theme (see the title). But more theatre groups should perform this play.

### Tis Pity She's a Whore

One of the last of the English Renaissance plays before the English Civil War (and the closing of the theatres), one critic referred to this incest-centered tragedy as “effectively closing the coffin lid on one of the most macabre episodes of the English stage.” That's not an overstatement: this play about Giovanni and his incestuous affair with his younger sister includes corrupt Church officials, mistaken murders, torture, and vital organ kebabs, to name a few of its perversities. Ford lacks Shakespeare's command of subtext, making the play easier to unpack because the dialogue isn't double (and even triple) layered with meaning. The play does feature some lovely turns of phrase, and the first scene between Giovanni and Annabella is wonderfully romantic (and all the more creepy as a result).

My book club had a blast discussing this play and the various commentaries on morality, society, and social constructs (and yes, my book club is a bunch of bibliophilic nerds).

### The Chronicle History of Perkin Warbeck

Definitely a play I need to read again at some point. Also, the least twisted of the four plays in this collection (While I know he's been dead for centuries, I do worry about Ford's mental state). A history play, *Perkin Warbeck* deals with an infamous pretenders to the English throne.

*Perkin Warbeck* hinges entirely on the actor playing the titular character. How he (and the director) interpret Warbeck will inform the rest of the play – it's the keystone to the entire production. To some extent, that's also true of Katherine.

As my familiarity with history plays from this period didn't expand beyond Shakespeare prior to reading this play, I enjoyed seeing how another playwright tackled this genre.

I'm glad I finally sat down and finished this collection (it's been over two years since I first read *Whore*). I come away impressed by Ford's interest in the psychology and inner workings of the human mind. He was, in some ways, ahead of his time. His female characters are especially notable, as they're more fleshed out than many from comparable plays. His writing lacks the depth of Shakespeare (who's doesn't?), but overall, the stories are riveting. It's a shame they aren't performed more. Recommended.

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### Cairon Ashman says

Hippolita was the night not woman of substance in this play as she attempts to stand up for herself and to exact revenge. She is not successful but she had a voice so kudos to her. Annabella was quite irritatingly placid, accepting her deranged, incestuous brothers decision to take her heart as no one else can have it but him. Male dominance at its worst is presented here. Additionally, women's loyalty to each other as well as their value on themselves is also up for question as Putana lives up to the meaning of her name. Having had the pleasure or misfortune based on the perspective of listening to an audio version online (<https://youtu.be/DKMKNMPluDM>) which sort of made my skin crawl each time Giovanni spoke. I do

believe the reaction is in keeping with what is expected however. It was an interesting read and suitably shocked the A level pupils that had the pleasure, or not, of reading it.

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### **John W. says**

I was pleased to read 'Tis a Pity but I cannot say that I am in a rush to read more of Ford's plays. The recent Red Bull Theatre's production was a laudable effort to produce a rarely seen work but the cast was somewhat uneven and the production did not have the remarkable ability to highlight the qualities of the play being produced as did the Fiasco Theatre's production of The Two Gentlemen of Verona.

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### **BearHugs says**

The fact that this reminds me so much of V.C. Andrews's Flowers in the Attic is . This, along with The Duchess of Malfi, are two of my favorite early modern plays. It is aesthetically gratifying and heart wrenching.

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### **Brian says**

#### 'Tis Pity She's a Whore: 4

This is really delightful. Written in 1633 (about 17 years after Shakespeare's death), this bawdy play deals with a brother and sister who fall in love with tragic consequences. There's nothing quite like Jacobean invective, and Act IV Scene 3 is an absolute delight. Surprising in its open treatment of the themes, given the time period. Highly recommended.

#### The Lover's Melancholy: 3

Also good but not quite as great. There is some pretty striking gender-bending that goes a step further than Shakespeare ever got.

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### **Phillip says**

The Lover's Melancholy: This is a fine romance. It didn't really grab me, I think in part because so much of the conflict happened well before the play actually begins and the play is dealing with the resolution of those conflicts. Prince Palador--the titular melancholy lover, who is actually not on stage that much despite his conflict being the central thread of the plot--is separated from his beloved Eloclea because his father tried to rape her, but her father interceded to save her, and was therefor banished from court, stripped of his titles, and imprisoned in his castle. Eloclea, for her part, disappeared and no one knew what had become of her. But this all happened before Ford's play actually begins. I'm not sure why he reduced such a compelling story to mere report.

What actually is in this play is mostly interesting for the number of people cross-dressed in disguise. Of course, this is a common technique in Renaissance comedy (and romance to a lesser extent), but Ford really goes for it. Eloclea dresses as Parthenophil, and several women fall in love with her in her male disguise. Grilla is actually a boy dressed as a girl and serving as Cucus' female page (which he thinks is a cool

innovation, even though everybody else mocks him), and in one scene Grilla actually performs three other female roles as Cucus rehearses talking to three women he plans to court.

**The Broken Heart:** Quite a strange and complex play, with a variety of love and revenge relationships interwoven. I think this is one of those plays that would be a lot easier to follow in seeing it performed than in reading it, because the set of relationships is so complex. However, one interesting thing here is that one of the major plot lines--the Bassanes-Penthea marriage--seems to be built on a standard *comedia dell'arte* plot. In the *comedia*, one common storyline is that a young and beautiful woman is married to an old and terrible man, but the marriage cannot separate her from her true love, and the lovers end up together with all the old man's money. Here that plot is grafted into a revenge tale. Ithocles prevents his sister Penthea from marrying Orgilus, her true love, and has her instead marry the old and jealous Bassanes. Instead of the *comedia*'s happy ending, however, Penthea ends up starving herself to death, Bassanes goes into mourning after seeing the error of his ways, and Orgilus murders Ithocles in revenge for thwarting his and Penthea's happiness.

**'Tis Pity She's A Whore:** Definitely the best of Ford's plays (though I haven't read *Perkin Warbeck* yet). *'Tis Pity* is a lot easier to follow than *The Lover's Melancholy* or *The Broken Heart*, because basically everything revolves around Annabella's sexual/romantic relationships. The basic premise of the plot is that Annabella and her brother Giovanni become lovers, unknown to all but her chamber woman and his teacher/friar/confessor. But their father is trying to find a husband for her, and when she gets pregnant with her brother's baby she agrees to marry one of the suitors. When the incestuous relationship is discovered by Annabella's new husband and his Spanish servant, things really go dark fast. I won't give away the ending, but it is definitely a good revenge tragedy.

**Perkin Warbeck:** According to the notes to this play, English renaissance dramatists more or less stopped writing history plays after 1613 (when Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* premiered). While the Elizabethans seemed to enjoy history plays, the Jacobean and Carolean apparently didn't have much taste for them (generally, I think, preferring bloodier revenge tragedies). But in the late 1620s or early 1630s, Ford took up the task of writing a new history play. And he did it really well. *Perkin Warbeck* is a political play, a philosophical play, a romantic play, an heroic play. It is interesting and complicated, particularly for an era ruled by an unpopular king (who would become more unpopular as time went on). What makes it interesting is the rather ambivalent political stance Ford seems to take--he seems to see the merits of all sides and, with the exception of a few characters who betray immediate oaths, the play doesn't seem to strongly condemn or support anyone. Warbeck is presented as a probably not noble but certainly admirable figure who goes to his death admirably maintaining his integrity (contra the real Warbeck who did confess to being an imposter, though he confessed under duress). Henry VII is somewhat tyrannical, somewhat weak-willed, but overall presented as a just, merciful, and generally good king. James IV of Scotland, though he eventually leaves Warbeck's cause, gets the ostensible prince a pretty good deal in allowing him free and unmolested passage out of Scotland, and of course James has done what's best for his kingdom and his people.

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### **Joti says**

The *Perkin Warbeck* play was decent - the pretender to the English throne - although I wish he had been successful, that would've been something cool. But I love how he entirely immersed himself in the role of Prince Edward, up until the very end to his execution.

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## Laura says

That play was ridiculous. It was like every spoof of Hamlet you've ever heard.

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## Wendy says

This collection of four plays by John Ford is a bit of a mixed bag.

*The Lover's Melancholy* is a wonderful play for people who think that the best thing about Shakespearean comedy is the cross-dressing. There are some laugh out-loud funny scenes generated by all the gender confusion - for example, there's a scene where a female character, finding her sexual advances rejected by the heroine (disguised as a boy), berates "him" at length for his lack of manliness. Doubly funny when you remember that all these parts would have been played by boys pretending to be girls in the first place. Otherwise, the play is pretty forgettable, but if I ever got the chance to see it performed, I think I'd take it.

I really struggled with *The Broken Heart*. Part of it is that it has a very large cast of characters, and I simply had trouble keeping track of who was who. (The *dramatis personae*, which I assume is reproduced faithfully from the first edition, doesn't help by giving characters rather short and cryptic descriptions. We have characters described as "flower of beauty", "honour of loveliness", "noise", "trusty", and "vexation".) Second, the tragedy of this piece revolves entirely around the female characters' inability to command their own destiny and secure their own happiness against the wills of their fathers, husbands, and brothers. This is a common thread in Jacobean/Caroline drama, but I found that Ford never brought the female characters sufficiently to life for me to really feel sympathy for them. I kept finding myself wishing that they'd take a hint from the heroine of *The Lover's Melancholy* - run away, come back dressed as a man, and use their counterfeit male privilege to secure a better outcome for themselves. (Maybe this is a danger of reading the same author's comedies and tragedies in close succession.)

I'm willing to bet that I'd like *The Broken Heart* much better if I actually saw it performed, with good actors to breathe life into the characters. It does have a rather gripping ending, with a rather inventive revenge killing - I'm sure it would stage very well.

*'Tis Pity She's a Whore* reminded me a lot of Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, a play with which it shares the plot devices of brother/sister incest and a man trying to marry off a particularly idiotic ward. I think Middleton writes more sympathetic female characters. In *'Tis Pity*, I didn't much care for the rather hapless Annabella, who manages to seem like a bit of a doormat even when she's conceiving a forbidden passion for her own brother. I preferred Hippolita, an older woman who sets out for vengeance when her lover dumps her to marry the younger and better socially connected Annabella. Ford doesn't allow her to succeed in her vengeance, but at least she gets to take an active part in the play.

*Perkin Warbeck* is an oddity - a history play written in the 1630s, when history plays had long been out of fashion. And rather unexpectedly, it was probably my favorite play in this volume. Unless you're very up on your early Tudor history, you'll probably want to read this with Wikipedia or a good history book on the period close at hand. Perkin Warbeck was a pretender to the throne of England who claimed to be Richard, the younger of Edward IV's two sons. (These two sons being the "princes in the tower" whose deaths suspiciously paved the way for Richard III to take the throne of England.) Warbeck raised a rebellion against Henry VII, which Henry promptly crushed. It makes a good story, but the most interesting thing is probably

Ford's portrayal of Henry VII. I don't know a lot about the historical Henry VII - any monarch who falls between Richard III and Henry VIII really has to fight for attention. The Henry VII portrayed by Ford is crafty, determined to hang onto his throne, but also desperately longing for peace and willing to be merciful nearly to a fault. It's tempting to think that Ford meant to hold up Henry VII as a model for his own monarch, Charles I, who faced his own threats to the legitimacy of his rule with less good grace.

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### **Jim says**

well what's not to be completely disgusted about the incest, dark sexual passion set in the Elizabeth England...

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