

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

Tis pity she's a whore 1626

John Ford. 1586-1639

Background

We have come to see that Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy are bold in narrative themes; In this such tragedy resembles the tragedy of the ancient Greeks, which revels in the bold and bloody. Take the seven remaining plays of Aeschylus. The Oresteia revolves around Orestes' revenge killing, for the adulterous behavior of his mother. Son and daughter eventually coincide on a plan to murder the adulterous wife, Clytemnestra, and her husband Aegisthus. Murdered in the bathtub, Greek style. Aeschylus' Prometheus, pinned to a rock in the Caucasus, is suffering from the peckings on his liver administered by a perpetually circling eagle. Despite this torture, and limited to a bare windy corner of the Caucasus, Prometheus carries on pained and suffering discourse with a colorful cohort of passing victims of Zeus' tyrannical rule. The plays of Sophocles and Euripides are equally peppered with violence and pain--the self blinding of Oedipus, the madnesses of Ajax or Medea, in which powerful characters act out, no doubt of their psychopathic danger. Ford, Massinger, and Shakespeare simply step into ancient Greek shoes, as they give free expression to replicas of human suffering and action at its most painful. They have learned the secret of Lessing in whose Laocoon we see pain frozen, and realize how beautiful agony is. To all of which it seems appropriate to add that the French notion of bienséance developed in the traces of a totally different strand of the ancient tradition. Bienséance, in Corneille and Racine, means something like propriety, a notion which precludes onstage violence, and restricts accounts of militant clashes--or other public violence--to narrative reports by messengers.

Events

We have mentioned the cycles of passion and lust found generating the present play. As it works, incestuous desire plays out into a nexus of socially unacceptable passions. Plays out? The onstage violence, or Giovanni's lust for Annabella, not only concludes with the rush of three suitors--Grimaldi, Bergetto, Sorranzo-- toward Annabella, but sets the drama in motion.under the same miasma of impurity as does Giovanni's lust. The fruitfulness we would like to think associated with pure love--Dante's for Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*--the cycles of malignity have been set in motion--should we now replace our Dante example with a scene from *The Streetcar named Desire*? Putana, the whore maid of Annabella, sets her stamp of approval onto the union of Giovanni and Annabella, clamors to be included among the drivers of the new drama.

The violence of these initial relationships is carried directly over into its precise spawn. Hippolita, a former lover of Sorranzo, is drawn into wanting a revenge trap. She arranges for Sorranzo's servant, Vasques, to join her, in murdering Sorranzo. She will subsequently murder Vasques, adding violence--another cardinal sin--to the culpae Giovanni planted on his return from University. It is Giovanni who appears, walking down the avenue, to catch the lustful eye of his sister, as his gait seems to imply. Putana affirms Annabella's sense that the handsome young man is her lover. The cycle of infections is nearly complete. Perhaps the literary parallel we want, here, is Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning becomes Electra*. Ford is bursting with parallels.

All of these miasmatic prefaces lead us toward what will give the title of the play its meaning. As Putana's whorish body sizzles in the flames of the Church's final solution. Its sanctifying removal of her from the face of the earth, the Cardinal himself seems to self expostulate 'tis pity she's a whore.' Does he mean what he seems to imply, that the lady's sensual attractiveness, which grounded so many moral failures, might have been an overwhelming beauty, had she been virtuous? Or is that too Pollyanna a view of the Cardinal's words? Does he mean a more sensuous turn of thought? Meaning, if only I too could have had a piece of that lady before she coruscated?

Plot

Giovanni has recently returned to his home town, Parma, after returning from University in Bologna. He quickly develops a fatal passion for his sister Annabella. She seems to him the most beautiful woman in the world. His first action is to consult with Friar Bonaventura, a representative of traditional Catholic virtues, to understand the nature of his, Giovanni's, sin. The friar, of course, recommends a strict period of penance and prayer and of course absolute absence from the object of his desire.

Annabella, meanwhile, is beset by a number of suitors, none of whom she likes, and one of whom, Sorrazano, she contrives to have murdered, so that in fact she and her brother enter the middle of the drama equally stained by mortal sin; a rotten prelude to a love affair, and one already bearing harbingers of disaster. The upshot of the dilemma is that Giovanni fails to comply with the deep intentions of his friar. It takes little time before Annabella is persuaded to follow her brother's passion into the same bed, and to ignite an incendiary set of passions, which unfold the story of this drama.

The story of the drama is the tale of the various amorous entanglements that ensue among the suitors of Annabella, their loyal servants, and the two principals, whose tortured incestuous love precludes any happiness and peace. In the climate of illicit affairs, back stage murders, and terror, the eventual killing of Annabella by Giovanni inevitably seems a relief.

THEMES

Passion and Lust Passion and lust, especially Giovanni's for Annabella, generate the events of the entire play, which in a sense has no meaning apart from the display of those two intense emotions. Nothing external avails to temper the reckless forward march of those two emotions. In the end, however, passion and lust prove themselves empty, and wear themselves out.

Desire versus Duty There is little call on the value of duty in this play. The friar, of course, is dutiful toward the principles of his church, to which he remains faithful. Vasques, for example is faithful to his master Sorranzo. On the whole, though, the play is a profound treatise on the necessity of boundaries and on the rewards of a life lived within those boundaries.

Female sexuality Female sexuality is largely unrestrained in the play. Putana of course is the exemplar of this kind of looseness. She not only approves of Annabella's incestuous affair, but supports her mistress throughout her love life, egging her on to take new chances, and praising her when she gains men's approval.

Injustice Arguably the greatest injustice of the play is the sacrifice of Putana in the flames. She is a bawd, but nothing worse. Perhaps you would say that she has the mind of a pimp, but nothing extra ordinarily different from that. It is to be noted that while it was the Cardinal who sanctioned the burning, the friar fled the ensuing tumult, having done his best to convince Giovanni to change his pattern of life.

Religion and Piety What is the value of religion and piety in the world presented here? The issue of incest and its consequences puts this theme at the center of the work. Religion is presented as essentially incapable of curing a distorted passion, and prone to overkill when it comes to the exercise of punitive power. However--and this is part of the genius of Ford in the present play--the author appears not to intervene onto his text with his own opinions, one way or the other. He neither rails against incest nor against the Catholic Church.\

CHARACTERS

Giovanni himself comes home, to Parma, inexperienced with girls, as the stock young European University graduate, a bit pallid and studious, He proves himself later to verge on the psychopathic, as we see in his relationships with his sister Annabella. Indeed it is his sister with whom he falls in love upon his return. He insists that his love is based solely on her beauty; he refuses to accept that his love for

Annabella is incestuous. In the end, Giovanni's murder of Annabella perplexes us, as does much psychopathic acting out. Giovanni may have said it best himself. He murdered Annabella so that he could see her in heaven.

Florio, the well meaning father of Giovanni and Annabella. A good man, he is stricken to death by the moral limits his two children have crossed.

Annabella, sister of Giovanni, is an attractive--attracts many men--woman who as far as we can know has no predisposition in favor of her brother Giovanni. She is surrounded by young upper class suitors, who seem endlessly ready, with time on their hands--to pull out a dagger or a poisoned drink, for the sake of love or death. It is to be remembered that Annabella was not the initiator of the love affair with Giovanni. But rather she seemed to be forcefully persuaded, by Putana, before she would accept the proposal to sleep with Giovanni. After her pregnancy is discovered her father, in order to cover the sin, is willing to follow the advice of others, even to the extent of marrying another putative husband to cover the sin. To be murdered in the end by her brother is a wrong and vicious end for Annabella.

The friar is deeply shocked, as per the teachings of the Church, by the notion of incest. When Giovanni comes to him for counsel, the priest comes down hard on the sin of incest. He urges Giovanni to seek seclusion to undertake a deep sequence of prayers and to remain in seclusion until his prayers for purity of soul have been answered. At the end of the tragedy, however, the Friar flees the scene of horror created by an unrepentant Giovanni.

Richardetto, the doctor who is husband to Hippolita. He appears in various guises and disguises.

Vasques, the witty and loyal servant of Sorranzo.

Putana is the faithful but scandalous maid of Annabella. She encourages her mistress in all her licentious adventures, and for this series of sinful behaviors, she is ordered by the Cardinal to be put to death by fire.