

“But a dining-time ‘twixt us and our confusion’: The Preoccupation with Time in Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore.*” Paper presented at the 6th annual **British Studies Student Symposium**, at Birmingham-Southern College, Birmingham, AL. Feb. 2008.

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Introduction to Presentation

Good afternoon. My name is Paul Blom, and the title of my presentation is “But a Dining-Time ’Twixt Us and Our Confusion: The Preoccupation with Time in Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore.*”

During my reading of *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* for our Seminar class, I began noticing in the fifth act how often the word “time” is repeated and how almost every single character exhibits a concern over how quickly time is moving. After noticing this, I looked back over the other four acts of the play and noticed that—although the concern with time reaches its peak during the fifth act, when the plot also reaches its climax—a preoccupation with time runs throughout the entire play. Perhaps it was my own realization of how little time I had left to choose a topic for Seminar, but I soon became fascinated with the notion of different perceptions of time.

Our culture is vastly different from the culture of seventeenth-century Europe. It stands to reason, then, that our perceptions of the world, specifically our notion of time, is significantly different from that of seventeenth-century Europe, the culture which spawned John Ford and his play *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore.*

I: Introduction

While we cannot generalize and state that any single period shared a single perception of time, we can realize that one generation shares many similar characteristics, all of which can create a handful of interpretations of time, all of which share similar characteristics as well, forming perceptions that are distinctly different from those of our own period.

Like almost all cultures of all periods, the people of seventeenth-century Europe shared a common preoccupation with time, specifically a sense of urgency. New intellectual and technological advancements contributed to an increased awareness of the rapid and often chaotic progression of time. Furthermore, people were more aware than ever of how much time they truly lacked, and the art, literature, and theology of the time all reveal a preoccupation with the need to make “good use” of one’s time.

John Ford’s tragedy, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, first published in 1633 and centered around the love affair between a brother and sister, has been the focus of several various critical studies during the past twenty years. While the play itself reveals a concern with several various themes, many critics have focused upon the notion of time within the play. Some have argued that this awareness of time is actually representative of a deep-set paranoia of unexpected death while others have claimed that the concern with time’s passage is a byproduct of the subgenre into which this play falls. However, none of the critics have tried to specifically categorize John Ford’s view of time as expressed in this work.

In her book, *The Map of Time*, Achsah Guibbory analyzes the ways in which various seventeenth-century poets explored the notion of time. She generally notes three different perspectives that appeared during that century: time as an endless cycle of improvement and degeneration, time as an opportunity for progress, and time as a finite and linear movement

toward decay (5). Before entering the theatrical world, Ford dabbled in poetry, but he is primarily known for his work as a dramatist. Because Guibbory's book focuses primarily on poets rather than dramatists, she does not mention John Ford or *'Tis Pity*. However, I believe that, using her definitions of these three categories and her observations of various poets who were contemporaries to Ford, I can categorize Ford's notion of time as one of linear decay within a finite horizon.

I will argue against the conflation of death and time, claiming that the play is, in fact, preoccupied with time's passage rather than with death's inevitable arrival. For every individual, death is the unavoidable result of time's progression, but this work, and the people of the period, focus less on the approach of death and more on the proper use of limited time. Furthermore, I will argue that *'Tis Pity* is not merely a reflection of a particular subgenre but that it reveals the author's and the period's obsession with a lack of time. Finally, I will argue that Ford's work suggests a notion of time within a finite and linear scale of degeneration.

II: Notions of Time in the Seventeenth Century

The European people of the seventeenth century shared an undeniable preoccupation with time. While almost all cultures of all periods have revealed some inevitable concern toward the movement of time, the seventeenth century saw major new developments in the areas of mathematics, cartography, physics and astronomy, all of which caused a shift in people's perception of time.

At this point in my paper, I discuss the Copernican Revolution and its effects on people's notions of time as well as technological advancements in devices for measuring time. I then discuss the concepts of *otium* and *negotium*, rest and work respectively, as well as the development of spontaneous or occasional meditation and the several treatises of the period

concerning the best use of one's time. However, I don't have time today to discuss these subjects, so I will move on to the clearest indicator of the period's obsession with time.

The seventeenth century's constant interest in time's rapid and unavoidable passage is evinced most clearly in the art of the period, works which reveal a preoccupation with time matching that of John Ford in *'Tis Pity*. Susan Kuretsky's study of the art of the period reveals countless paintings, engravings, and sketches that focused on both time's rapid progress and its inexorable effect upon the physical world, using as subject matter ancient ruins, natural disasters, and even personifications of time itself. (26).

At this point in my paper, I discuss the newly emerging art form of the landscape and specific works that reveal an interest in depicting the degenerative effects of time upon both natural and manmade structures. Two such works are Pieter Saenredam's 1629 painting *Church of Santa Maria della Febbre, Rome* and Cornelius van Poelenburch's 1620 painting, *Roman Landscape*. However, there isn't time to discuss these in detail right now.

Along with depicting the effects of time, countless artists depicted time itself within their works. Most likely, the Western European personification of time is a descendant of the Roman personification, Saturn, whom the Romans adopted centuries earlier from the Greek Khronos. At this point in my paper, I discuss the Greek myth of Khronos and his rebellion against his father, the catalyst for the beginning of time. However, I won't do that today.

The image adopted from Khronos had been maintained for centuries and continued within works of the seventeenth century. However, Time's interaction with the other aspects within each artwork provides new themes and new representations of time and its passage, such as in Crispijn van de Passe the Elder's 1570 series of engravings titled *The Use and Abuse of Time*, specifically Numbers One and Four in the series. Another such work is Raphael Sadelaer

I's late sixteenth-century engraving *Time and Labor*, which appears on your handout. Such works reflect the growing preoccupation with making good use of one's time. The depiction of time is typical, but Time's interaction with the other figures is what reflects the new preoccupation with managing time well. Instead of passively observing, Time has agency, assisting those who spend their time wisely but attacking and degrading those who waste their time.

The other image on your handout is Jan Wierix's 1577 engraving titled "Ruyne (Old Age)" from *Theatrum vitae humanae*. Time appears in typical form, with the exception that, rather than muscular, he is emaciated and distraught. More interestingly, Death is also personified within this same work. At this point, I'd go into further detail to contrast the two figures within this painting since they provide excellent examples for the usual depictions of both figures. However, I won't do that right now. The most important thing to note from this work is that, according to Kuretsky, Wierix's work reflects the distinct notions people of the period had concerning Death and Time, two similar but completely separate forces (35). Even when juxtaposed with the more directly destructive figure of Death, time's destructive effects still permeate the art of the period.

Because of the Copernican Revolution, technological advances in measuring time, the rise of the occasional meditation, and innovations in the artistic depiction of time, the seventeenth century saw a new obsession with time, a new perception of its hectic and chaotic passage, and a desire to make the best use of the little time allotted to each individual.

III: 'Tis Pity She's a Whore, A Critical Background

At this point in my paper, I would discuss the critical background of *'Tis Pity*, the major aspects on which most other critics have focused, and the parallels critics have drawn between

this work and several others. Then I would discuss the two ways in which most critics view Ford's preoccupation with time. However, I cannot cover all of that today, so I will briefly summarize these two different critical perspectives.

Many critics have noted the preoccupation with time that is evinced by almost the entire cast of characters in *'Tis Pity*. Because time's movement leads toward death, many of these critics view any preoccupation with time as merely a symptom of a larger concept, an obsessive fear of death, rather than an interest in time by itself.

Meanwhile other critics see the focus on time as symptomatic of the play's subgenre, observing how Ford combines the obvious characters and events of a tragedy with the environment typical of the city comedy, making *'Tis Pity* what Foster coins a "city tragedy." According to such critics, the rapid pace of the play and the preoccupation with time evinced by the characters is less a conscious attempt to communicate notions of time and more a result of the relatively new subgenre into which this play falls.

These studies are well-informed and represent a wide range of critics, but they unfairly reduce Ford's own preoccupation with time, and they fail to attempt to categorize Ford's actual vision of time. I believe that Ford's time in *'Tis Pity* can and should progress on its own.

IV: Decay and Linear, Finite Time in *'Tis Pity*

Ford's notion of time is that of an agent of decay but something that can, in the face of this decay, be used wisely. According to Achsah Guibbory, the notion of time for the majority of people during the seventeenth century was a linear and finite time moving toward decay. Theirs is not a time of an infinite horizon. Nor is it a cycle of improvement and degeneration or an opportunity for constant progress (27).

Ford's notion of time is what Joanna Hodge refers to as "a finite time of moral dilemmas, which acquire their distinctive character by virtue of some series of time constraints and mutual exclusions in a sequence of possible activities and consequences" (110). Because Ford's characters are acting within a finite scale of time, their time is limited, thus forcing various choices upon them concerning how best to use their time, a preoccupation I have already mentioned concerning both religious treatises and artworks of the period. Almost no one could avoid this perception of time, which considered the world as rapidly degenerating along a limited line rather than offering hope of renewal or progress. Ford's tragedy does the same.

The play itself is permeated with language that reveals a preoccupation with the concept of time. From the opening to closing scenes, Ford constantly reminds the audience that time is running out, revealing his own notions of a linear and finite time of decay. All of the characters exhibit this concern. However, since my own time is limited as well, I will have to only briefly touch upon the majority of the characters.

The Friar Bonaventura is keenly aware of how quickly time is pulling Giovanni and Annabella toward their doom, knowing that they will not succeed in their incestuous relationship. In the Friar's failure and despair, Ford underscores the hectic movement of time and the degeneration of the world. Meanwhile Florio, Putana, and Richardetto all employ the image of the hour growing late to lament those who do not take advantage of the time they have been given. Furthermore, Richardetto defines wisdom as not delaying or wasting time. In contrast, Bergetto refuses to acknowledge the rapid movement of time, even going so far as to insult the very notion of time. However, he is the fool of the play, the first to die, and his murder is accidental and unpunished. Like Bergetto, the Cardinal has little sense of urgency and is indifferent to time's inevitable movement, but the Cardinal's references to time are all associated

with examples of his own corruption. In this way, Ford undermines the foolish Bergetto's statements concerning time and the corrupt Cardinal's perception of time, thus reinforcing the other characters' sense of urgency concerning time's hectic movement. Finally, Vasques, aware of the need for urgency, manipulates others into adopting a leisurely notion of time only to deceive them and to delay their actions, giving himself more time to act.

The most significant notions of time and its rapid movement, however, appear during the discussions between the two tragic lovers, Annabella and Giovanni, particularly in the final act of the play. The opening lines of the act are Annabella's, during which she laments time's quick passage, realizing that she is almost out of time:

Pleasures, farewell, and all ye thriftless minutes / Wherein false joys have spun a weary life! / To these my fortunes now I take my leave. / Thou, precious Time, that swiftly rid'st in post / Over the world, to finish up the race / Of my last fate, here stay thy restless course, / And bear to ages that are yet unborn / A wretched, woeful woman's tragedy. (V.i.1-8)

Annabella fears that she has wasted too much of her life, but she hopes that "precious Time" will pause for a moment to carry her story to others in the future. She is all too aware of the process of degeneration and destruction that is approaching its end, but desperately hopes that time's movement will mean the movement of her story into the future.

Giovanni makes a similar reference to pausing time later in the act, during his confrontation with Annabella for marrying Soranzo. He claims that she is a "faithless sister" (V.v.9) and condemns her actions: "I hold fate / Clasp'd in my fist, and could command the course / Of time's eternal motion, hadst thou been / One thought more steady than an ebbing sea" (V.v.11-14). While Giovanni is aware of time's constant progression, he claims that the power of his love could have paused such movement if only Annabella had not been so weak. However, his very language reveals the impossibility of such declarations. According to Harper, the

etymology of the word “time” partially stems from the word “tide.” When Giovanni’s condemns his sister’s faithlessness and instability with a reference to “an ebbing sea,” he is reminding the audience of time’s own associations with the sea and its continual motion. In Giovanni’s eyes, Annabella has become as inconstant as the sea, the sea that never stops moving just as time never stops moving. Even when he declares the awesome magnitude of his love for Annabella, he simultaneously reminds the audience that no love of any magnitude can prevent time’s destructive forces from crashing down upon the world.

Annabella, however, must remind Giovanni of this fact, for she is painfully aware of how little time the two lovers have left. She warns him, “There’s but a dining-time / ‘Twixt us and our confusion: let’s not waste / These precious hours in vain and useless speech” (V.v.17-19). Again, Annabella is concerned with making good use of the little time allotted to them, for she has already sensed their impending doom. Later in the scene, Giovanni makes another reference to time, and this reference not only highlights the rapid movement of time but also the finite definition of time that permeates Ford’s work. When Annabella warns him that the coming banquet will bring death, Giovanni remarks “The schoolmen teach that all this globe of earth / Shall be consum’d to ashes in a minute” (V.v.30-32). Throughout the text, Ford has been preoccupied with notions of decay, which signify a finite and linear progression of time. However, this passage is more than a mention of time’s rapid movement or an image of decay. It is an explicit reference to Armageddon or Judgment Day, the end of the finite timeline.

Unable to endure the thought of his love with another man or the thought of his love being shamed once the incestuous affair is made public, Giovanni determines to kill his sister. Raising his dagger to strike, Giovanni begs the sun to dim its light and turn noon to night in order to hide the horror of his actions (V.v.79-80). During the next scene, when he enters the banquet

hall with his sister's heart upon the dagger, he describes the murder using nearly the exact same terms (V.vi.22-23). This emphasis upon the sun once more reminds the audience of time's constant motion. Furthermore, it reflects upon Giovanni's own attempts to usurp agency over time both in his request for day to turn to night and in the fact that his murder of Annabella ends the marriage between his sister and Soranzo and halts the development of the baby in Annabella's womb.

Joanna Hodge's exploration of the linear view of time as an agent of decay offers a possible insight into Giovanni's violent and shocking actions upon his lover. Since this notion of time is one of unavoidable degeneration, she states: "Because there must be death, there is contingency only in the ethical sense. Whatever I do, the other will die; there is contingency not with respect to whether, but only with respect to how that death takes place" (126-27). Annabella is already doomed, and the only control these two lovers have concerns how and when her doom falls upon her. Again, he can choose the time at which she dies, a choice Giovanni considers as a way to gain agency over time.

Despite this attempt, Giovanni is unable to halt time's movement, and, following his murder of his sister, Giovanni must confront Soranzo at the birthday feast. Giovanni's dramatic entrance into the banquet hall and the revelation of his affair with his sister concluded by his murdering Annabella leads to Florio's immediate death and an open battle. Giovanni slays Soranzo only to be slain by Vasques. As he bleeds and weakens, Giovanni ponders his own mortality and the speed with which he is destroyed: "O, I can stand no longer! Feeble arms, / Have you so soon lost strength?" (V.vi.83-84). Despite his attempts to halt the progression of time in order to maintain union with his love, Giovanni is instead forced to murder his sister and then dies at the hands of those against whom he would be revenged.

By the end of the play, all hopes for renewal have been lost. The wedding feast, a scene of regeneration, is the scene of Hippolita's demise. The birthday feast, another typical setting for celebration and renewed affirmation of life, becomes a slaughterhouse. Verna Foster's depiction of the final scene reveals the notions of time as a linear process of decay: "The tragedy of Giovanni and Annabella bears no regenerative fruit for their city. The society that remains at the end of the play is sterile. The richness of life has gone from it" (198).

By the close of the play, every character involved in a love affair, who offers some chance of regeneration, some hope to turn this process of decay toward a cycle of renewal, has departed in one way or another. Richardetto was believed to be dead and only reveals himself during the play's closing, although he has lost all those whom he once loved. His niece, Philotis, has fled to a nunnery, and her fiancé Bergetto has been slain accidentally. Richardetto's wife, Hippolita, in an attempt to slay her former lover, has been deceived into poisoning herself while Soranzo is killed by Giovanni. Giovanni also cuts out the heart of his lover and sister, Annabella, and is then killed by Vasques. Florio's line will not continue, and upon learning of his children's incest, he dies of shock and shame. And finally, the corrupt Cardinal confiscates all of the wealth of Florio's estate, closing the play with a final condemnation upon the only possible symbol for regeneration, Annabella, who has died with a child in her womb. In the end, time—not love—conquers all.

V: Conclusion

For Ford, time is not a cyclical rise and decline. His tragedies such as *'Tis Pity* suggest nothing regenerative about the future, no lesson learned, no justice gained. Nor is time for Ford an opportunity for progress. People should act quickly and make good use of their time not in an attempt to rise above time's agency but in an attempt to live best with the little time they have, to

achieve whatever goals they have before it is too late since all are doomed to feel time's decaying effects.

Time is limited for the people of Ford's tragedy, just as time was limited for the people of the seventeenth century. They saw time as finite and linear, leading from a moment of earthly paradise toward an inevitable and destructive decline that would only end in the earth's annihilation during Judgment Day. Despite the presence of cyclical and progressive notions of time during this period, Ford is the product of the influence of the third notion of time, that of decay, as evident throughout *'Tis Pity*. However, he not only reveals his period's own preoccupation with time but also continued to influence it through his best-known work, a work that, hopefully, will not fall victim to time's destructive forces, any time soon.

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