



This Rough Magic

A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal

Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature



John Ford: 'Tis Pity She's A Whore, by Martin White.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Pp. 176.

Reviewer(s): Renée Pigeon

Reviewed Work(s):

Source: *This Rough Magic*, Vol. 4, No. 2, (December 2013), pp. 41-44.

Published by: www.thisroughmagic.org

Stable URL: <http://www.thisroughmagic.org/pigeon%20review.html>

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This entry in the "Shakespeare's Contemporaries" category of Palgrave Macmillan's *The Shakespeare Handbooks* series offers Martin White, Professor of Theatre at the University of Bristol, a welcome platform to share his long-standing interest in and enthusiasm for John Ford's best-known play, the story of the forbidden passion of siblings Giovanni and Annabella.

Though brief at less than 200 pages, this well-designed survey covers textual issues and early performances in the first chapter, introduces the play's intellectual and cultural contexts (from incest to Neoplatonism) in the third, and reviews its critical history in the sixth and final chapter. In addition to addressing these contextual issues, White foregrounds performance concerns throughout the book. The insightful second chapter, "Commentary: The Play in Performance" (in many ways the heart of the book and its longest section) is an extended and lively close analysis of the play's text, featuring frequent consideration of staging issues, while the fourth and fifth chapters consider "Key Productions and Performances" and "The Play on the Screen" respectively.

One of the great strengths of the commentary and the book as a whole is the nimble way White provides capsule accounts of a host of issues related to staging Renaissance plays, particularly in a Jacobean indoor theatre, from the difficulties of conveying humor to the use of prose versus verse to early modern stage lighting (a particular focus of White's research). While some of the points made by White will be familiar to the specialist, they will provide the student with a helpful introduction not only to this play, but also to such issues in the early modern drama as a whole.

In addition to exploring issues related to original stage practices, White also pays careful attention to more recent productions and the play's impact on current audiences. His analysis frequently emphasizes how the play works in performance; he notes at one point, for example, with regard to "impenetrable lines that are clearly intended to be funny but in which the joke is hard to locate" that editorial glosses, "while helpful to the reader, may not help the actor: you can't act a footnote" (45-46). Though some critics disparage the play's subplots and its mixture of comedy and tragedy, particularly in the case of the slow-witted suitor Bergetto, White is a rather passionate and persuasive advocate for the unity and integrity of Ford's play. He praises a 1977 RSC production, for example, for "an affecting relationship between Poggio and Bergetto (essential to the proper working of III.vii and the overall moral compass of the play)" (113) and argues in the commentary that "in a play rife with selfish and self-seeking men, especially in their attitudes towards women, the

poignancy of this innocent's death is underlined by his concern for Philotis" (54). To White, Bergetto's death, like Mercutio's in *Romeo and Juliet*, is "a tipping point and signals the ultimately tragic outcome of the play" (54).

As his comment about male characters' selfish attitudes towards women quoted above suggests, White, unlike some critics he cites, does not see Annabella's brother Giovanni "uncritically, as he sees himself" or as a rebellious, existential hero (113), noting in the commentary Giovanni's possessive attitude towards his sister and the lies he tells her. To White, Giovanni's murder of his sister and their child is an "appalling and inhuman act" and "a terrible, perverted conclusion to his increasingly demented possessiveness" (80). In a similar vein, he remarks on the "shifty reasoning" and "obnoxious characteristics" (37) of Soranzo in his dealings with his rejected mistress Hippolita.

In considering screen versions of the play, White notes that given the relative neglect of the works of Shakespeare's contemporaries on both the stage and the screen, "*'Tis Pity's* three adaptations for the screen (in 1971, 1978, and 1980) make it one of the most filmed of early modern non-Shakespearean dramas" (122). Interestingly, only one of these adaptations is British. The 1971 Italian film, *Addio, fratello crudele* (*Good-bye, cruel brother*), features Charlotte Rampling as Annabella; White remarks he was unable to trace and watch the 1978 version, made for Belgian Television. In 1980, Roland Joffé directed the play for the BBC with a Victorian English setting (this version, he adds, is

only available on VHS and difficult to obtain). His analyses of both the 1971 film and the 1980 television production are interesting, detailed and sensitive to nuance and setting.

The brief sixth and final chapter offers a concise and opinionated review of “Critical Assessments” of the play from early responses to the present day. While such a review is obviously an easier task to undertake with Ford’s play than with one of Shakespeare’s more familiar and much-studied works, this is a model of how to do it well, and the final chapter again demonstrates White’s enthusiasm for the play as well as his strong views about it.

A few infelicities have slipped past the author and his editors: in the commentary, White refers to Sir Philip Sidney’s prose romance *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* as “one of the most famous poems of the age” (35) and calls the blinding of the character Putana “a punishment echoing Oedipus’ penalty for witnessing the incest with his mother” (86), a rather puzzling description of Oedipus’ crime and its penalty. These minor quibbles aside, this is a welcome addition to a strong series from Palgrave Macmillan. It would particularly benefit instructors preparing to teach the play, whether in a survey course or more advanced seminar. Note: *This Rough Magic*’s readers interested in Ford’s play may wish to access an interesting 2009 production by the UWE Independent Theatre Company, adapted and directed by Caroline Hadley, available online on Vimeo (<http://vimeo.com>).