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Edited by Michael Neill

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Introduction

MICHAEL NEILL

This collection of essays was assembled to honour the 1986 quarter-century of John Ford's birth. That it has taken longer to complete than any of its contributors would have wished is perhaps not altogether inappropriate for a dramatist who was himself something of a latecomer. Although he established a minor reputation in the first two decades of the seventeenth century as an occasional poet and author of moral tracts, Ford made no certain contribution to the stage before the early 1620s, when he emerged as a collaborator with a group of seasoned professionals including Dekker, Rowley, Webster and (almost certainly) Middleton and Fletcher; and he was probably at least forty – a relatively advanced age by the expectations of the time – when he first tried his hand as an independent dramatist. Despite recent attempts to establish earlier datings for *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and *Perkin Warbeck*, there is no sure evidence of unassisted work for the stage before 24 November 1628, when his first-published play, *The Lover's Melancholy*, was licensed for performance. Only one other of his plays can be dated with any certitude, *The Lady's Trial*, licensed on 3 May 1638; yet it seems likely that the rest of his surviving independent work (with the possible exception of *The Queen*, published anonymously in 1653, but often reckoned an early piece) belongs to the intervening ten-year period. *Love's Sacrifice* was entered in the Stationer's Register on 21 January 1631/2, and *The Broken Heart* on 28 March 1633, the year which saw the publication of both these tragedies; *Perkin Warbeck* was registered on 24 February 1633/4 and printed soon after; while *The Fancies Chaste and Noble* went to press in 1638. Although it has proved impossible to fix

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the first performances any more precisely than these terminal dates allow, there is growing agreement that the three plays written for the King's Men, *The Lover's Melancholy*, the lost *Beauty in a Trance*, and *The Broken Heart*, all belong to the years from 1627 to 1630, before Ford's transfer to the rival Cockpit company, for whom he wrote the remainder of his work. Andrew Gurr's essay in the present collection finds further evidence for this sequence of events; he makes a strong case for 1629 as the most likely date for *The Broken Heart*, 1630 for *'Tis Pity*, 1631 for *Love's Sacrifice*, and 1632 for *Perkin Warbeck*. Whatever the precise details, we can reasonably assume that Ford's career as a solo dramatist probably extended over little more than a decade, and that his most significant work belongs to its unusually productive first five years. It is a short career and a fairly slender *oeuvre* on which to found a major reputation.

There is, in fact, something more than a little anomalous about the estimation in which Ford is presently held – for a start he has attracted an amount of critical attention that may seem out of proportion to his small and somewhat uneven output. Of the eleven independently written plays, only eight now survive, and of these only three (*'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, *The Broken Heart*, and *Perkin Warbeck*) have been widely acclaimed; while among the handful of extant plays in which he is supposed to have collaborated, *The Witch of Edmonton* alone is granted much merit. Yet Ford has been the subject of some sixteen books and monographs in the last half century, in addition to large numbers of theses, essays and scholarly articles. His often-anthologized major tragedies have appeared in a variety of critical editions, notably those in the important Revels, Regents and New Mermaid series; and his *Selected Plays* (edited by one of the contributors to the present volume, Colin Gibson) were included in the relatively short list of Cambridge Renaissance and Restoration Dramatists in his quatercentenary year. Yet all of this activity has not served to establish any real consensus about the quality of Ford's work; and it seems significant that no publisher since the nineteenth century has thought it worthwhile to issue a complete edition of the plays – a situation that contrasts sharply with treatment of the much bulkier canons of Dekker, Massinger and Beaumont and Fletcher, dramatists whose critical repute is generally lower than Ford's.

His reputation in the theatre is, if anything, even more uncertain – as Roger Warren's survey of the recent stage history reminds us; while *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* has been amongst the most frequently

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performed of non-Shakespearean plays, its popularity has not served to awaken significant theatrical interest in the rest of his work. A lone revival of *The Broken Heart* at Chichester in 1962 attracted favourable attention from reviewers, but was not enough to save the play from falling back into theatrical oblivion; and the same seems to have been true of the very much more successful productions of *Perkin Warbeck* and *The Witch of Edmonton* at Stratford in 1975 and 1981. The quatercentenary seems to have passed virtually unnoticed in the theatre world – despite its auspicious coincidence with the opening of a new Stratford playhouse, the Swan, dedicated specifically to the production of Renaissance plays.

The present collection of essays was intended not merely to salute the dramatist's four hundredth anniversary, but to take advantage of the opportunity it provided for reviewing Ford's place in the canon. In this it substantially follows the pattern set by Douglas Howard's companion volume for the Massinger quatercentenary.¹ But where Howard's project was principally one of remedying critical neglect, this collection has necessarily had to engage with a much more extensive history of critical debate. One reason for the intensity of that debate has been that since the early nineteenth century at least Ford has served as kind of test-case for the so-called 'decadence' of the Caroline period. While the idea of decadence is no longer granted the explanatory power it seemed to have even twenty years ago, it has continued to underlie most of the negative criticism of Ford in the last two decades, so that his apologists have always felt obliged to confront it.²

'Decadence' is a slippery concept which has been used to embrace a variety of alleged failings in Ford's art: formal defects – like his propensity for 'melodramatic' and 'sensational' effects; stylistic debility – in the vagueness of his metaphors, their lack of organic connectedness, and the etiolation of his blank verse line; and moral obliquity – displayed variously in précieux indifference to public values, 'effeminate' emotionalism, and a theatrical opportunism which leaves his attitudes to the degenerate protagonists of plays like *'Tis Pity* and *Love's Sacrifice* radically unclear. Colin Gibson's comprehensive study of 'Ford's Poetry of Death', in tracing the development of certain key tropes and images from the early non-dramatic poems and moral tracts, follows D. K. Anderson's pioneering work on Ford's imagery³ in highlighting a complex interplay of imagery and action in Ford's finest work. While Gibson's primary focus is on

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'the language of sensation', Richard Madelaine examines the dramatist's handling of 'sensational' and 'melodramatic' action. Ranging widely across the plays, Madelaine demonstrates that while Ford makes free use of sensational effects, he is not a truly 'melodramatic' writer in the pejorative sense, since the sensationalism is rarely an end in itself but firmly subordinated to the plays' thematic concerns. This view finds broad confirmation in Roger Warren's account of recent stage productions – even if both essays advance grounds for surprising reservations about the dramatic viability of some of the more widely-praised scenes in *The Broken Heart*, for example.

In so far as they deal, explicitly or implicitly, with the issue of Ford's supposed decadence, all three of these essays found their approach on broadly New Critical notions about the integrity of the text. The traditional idea of Caroline theatrical decadence, however, posits a construction of historical developments in the early seventeenth century which also deserves to be challenged, since it has been substantially undermined by recent scholarship. English Renaissance drama, according to the organic model from which the concept of decadence derives, reached an early maturity with Shakespeare, only to enter a thirty-year decline, culminating in a well-deserved fall with the closure of the theatres in 1642. Thus the late-Jacobean and Caroline theatre has been heavily implicated in the processes of social disintegration leading up to the disaster of Civil War: the players are supposed to have identified themselves more and more decisively with the narrowly sectional interests of the Court – as represented by the coterie audience at the exclusive indoor theatres, the Blackfriars and the Cockpit, which increasingly monopolized the energies of the leading companies. The work of dramatists like Ford, in consequence, has habitually been read in the proleptic shadow of political cataclysm. Though its over-heated prose may seem to expose the author's simple-minded historicism all too easily, S. P. Sherman's essay, 'Forde's Contribution to the Decadence of the Drama', only states more flamboyantly the assumptions underlying much subsequent hostile commentary. Sherman sensed a direct link between what he saw as the sensationalism and moral depravity of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and the righteous anti-theatrical fury of a Puritan parliament at the outbreak of Civil War:

This play stands for the ultimate corruption of the romantic ideal. When the last ugliness of unnatural lust and crime is clothed in a veil of divine illusion, decadence can go no farther. When the conflict of incestuous desires with the established order is presented as a genuine problem, moral anarchy can go no

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farther. It is time for the reaction to set in. It is time for the Puritan Prynne to lose his ears in an assault upon the iniquitous stage – time for the theatres to close, and for the new order, preparing among the debris of the old, to assert itself.⁴

The work of recent researchers, however, has rendered such naive historicizing increasingly difficult to sustain: it has become clear that the closure of the theatres had more to do with administrative precaution than ideological fervour. Whatever their disagreements, the work of Ann Jennalie Cook, Martin Butler and Andrew Gurr has called in question traditional assumptions about the social gulf between the older ‘public’ playhouses and the newer ‘private’ theatres whose coterie audiences were supposed to have pushed the dramatists towards précieux decadence; and Margot Heinemann’s and Martin Butler’s patient reclamations of the missing history of ‘opposition theatre’, have made it no longer tenable to account for the development of early Stuart drama in terms of any simple alignment of Court and theatre interests.⁵ Thus it has become possible, as a number of essays in our collection demonstrate, to examine Ford’s relation to his milieu in a rather less polemical climate.

Andrew Gurr’s ‘Singing Through the Chatter’ considers the implications of Ford’s change of allegiance from the Blackfriars to the Cockpit, outlining more sharply than has hitherto been done the different stylistic ideals encouraged by these rival ‘private’ establishments; he concludes that the clarity and simplicity of Ford’s later style represents, in part at least, a growing sympathy with the chaster theatrical language promoted by the poets of the Cockpit circle. Led by Shirley, the latter represented what was essentially the position of old-fashioned journeymen-playwrights, professionally hostile to the intrusions of courtier dramatists led by Davenant and Carew at the Blackfriars. Ford himself, as Gurr’s analysis of his acquaintance shows, had links of friendship with both parties in the dispute; and as a writer jealously conscious of his amateur status who had nevertheless served his theatrical apprenticeship in the professional school, he must have felt artistic sympathies with both. What is not at all clear, and may deserve further pondering, is whether his drift away from the courtier faction has any ideological implications: whether, that is to say, Gurr’s argument serves to situate the dramatist inside a purely literary debate, or whether the criticality of Ford’s position corresponds in some profound way to the ‘ideological instability’ which Jean Howard uncovers in her analysis of *Perkin Warbeck*.

Martin Butler’s essay on *Love’s Sacrifice* also takes its departure

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point from an examination of the circles in which Ford moved, but uses it to show how certain supposedly decadent traits in his writing are better understood in terms of adherence to a 'narrow [but] demanding tradition'. In emphasizing the theatrical self-consciousness encouraged by the intimate and knowing literary and theatrical milieu in which Ford flourished, Butler pays attention to the witty allusiveness of Ford's text, its delight in ingeniously transformed borrowings, in generic play and subversions of conventional expectations. In her recent book, Dorothy Farr accounts for the copious echoes of *Othello* in *Love's Sacrifice* as signalling 'a deliberate reassessment' of Shakespeare's tragedy, but the reassessment she envisages is conducted within the naturalistic terms allowed by Bradleian criticism;⁶ Butler, by contrast, sees *Love's Sacrifice* as a metatheatrical drama, flaunting its intertextuality and constantly drawing attention to the deliberate flaws in its mimetic surface. Like the provocative work of Jonathan Dollimore, Butler's essay describes an imaginative world in which it would be vain to expect characterization of a coherent essentialist kind: identity in Ford's plays is 'fissured and prismatic'; it may amount in fact (as Brian Opie's essay also speculates) to nothing more than a name – an arbitrary label linking together a succession of play-roles determined by the endless reworkings of earlier dramas.

Butler's historical approach is used to underpin an essentially formalist account of Ford's tragedy which broadly concurs with the method of three other essays – in particular Kate McLuskie's much more wide-ranging investigation of Ford's principles of dramatic construction. She sees the designs of the plays with their 'curiously disrupted effects' as being deliberately fragmentary: narrative continuity and psychological consistency are at a discount in drama of this kind, which depends on a manneristic dispersal of effect rather than the cumulative orchestration of the baroque style with which Ronald Huebert has tried to associate Ford's writing. The gap which McLuskie discerns in Ford's dramaturgy between language and action, 'between events seen and meanings understood', establishes a point of connection with my own analysis of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. It concentrates upon the tableau of Annabella's impaled heart as an episode superficially resembling those potent 'gests' in which the meanings of earlier tragedies can seem to be tightly enfolded; but argues that the excessive pressure of allusiveness and symbolic suggestion in Ford's scene has the disturbing effect of hollowing out Giovanni's emblem of essential selfhood, paradoxically stripping

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away all metaphoric cover from the bleeding meat on his dagger. It remains a 'riddle', in Vasques' baffled phrase, but only because of its irreducible literalness, its brute resistance to interpretation. Verna Foster's very different approach to this most Jacobean-seeming of Ford's tragedies, shares with these other essays a strong sense of the virtuoso aspect of Ford's writing – the ingenuity with which he reworks and recombines inherited material. *'Tis Pity's* fascination lies for her in its ingenious yoking of a plot that combines elements of Elizabethan romantic tragedy and Jacobean revenge drama with a milieu and characters belonging squarely inside the convention of Jacobean city comedy. What results is an experimental 'City Tragedy' whose only real precedent is in the *Women Beware Women* of Ford's former collaborator, Thomas Middleton.

In a thoughtful afterword meditating the limits of her own formalist account of Ford's art, Kathleen McLuskie briefly considers the potential of other approaches, including the meticulous particularity of Butler's theatre history and the more abstract speculations of 'cultural history'. The challenge she issues for the application of New Historicist methodologies to Ford is taken up by two of the remaining essays in this collection, Jean Howard's elegant unpacking of attitudes to gender and authority in *Perkin Warbeck*, and Brian Opie's testing anatomy of the patterns of love and friendship in *Love's Sacrifice* and *The Lady's Trial*. Howard's piece provides a welcome change of direction from the metadramatic readings which have become something of a cliché in accounts of this tragedy of a royal pretender. Building on the real insights of that well-worn approach, she shows how the figure of a player-prince, imagined as an effeminate travesty of the true king, fits into a larger ideological pattern that defines female authority as essentially 'illegitimate'. Nevertheless behind the official play which demonizes female power, and allows a space for female heroism only in the passive sufferance exhibited by both Perkin and his bride, Katherine Gordon, Howard discerns the shadow of a counter-play in which Ford feminizes the history genre and 'shows how a patriarchal, absolutist culture unthinks itself'. In this ambiguously nostalgic attempt to revive a genre, the chronicle history, the supersession of whose ideological assumptions it already foreshadows, Howard detects a radical instability – an instability which reflects 'the increasing strain under which patriarchal absolutism laboured at the end of the Caroline era'.

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Despite its more structuralist orientation and evident reservations about metadramatic and intertextual ingenuities, Brian Opie's essay works its way towards similar conclusions. In his view, Ford's preoccupation with affective personal relationships represents anything but that indifference to public issues of which Caroline drama is so often accused. Instead it is to be seen as part of the process of formulating a new definition of social identity – an identity no longer derived primarily from kin networks, nor defined by absolutist structures, but one 'capable of fully independent action and grounded in affectionate relationships with . . . perceived equals'. Such a process he believes to constitute one of those 'transformations of the inner landscape [which are] essential components of . . . large-scale revolutionary events'.

It is part of Opie's case that the ground plan for Ford's plays can be discerned in the argumentation of the early prose works – in particular, *A Line of Life*; and his discussion has this much in common with several somewhat unsophisticated attempts to deflect the charge of moral decadence from Ford's plays. The best known of these is Mark Stavig's *John Ford and the Traditional Moral Order* (1968), a book whose historical importance as the first thoroughgoing attempt to provide an integrated account of Ford's non-dramatic and dramatic writing, has guaranteed it attention out of all proportion to its merit. Stavig's compulsion to turn the plays into dramatized tracts – or, as Harriett Hawkins puts it, 'monuments of dead idealisms' – might have seemed calculated to drive them from the stage for ever. If they have survived such well-meaning moral resuscitations, it is only, as Hawkins's essay shows, because of their quite un-moral power to disturb the emotions of an audience. Dreary as Stavig's pieties can become, however, they are merely an acute symptom of a much more widespread critical disease which is the real object of Hawkins's stiff medicine. She builds her essay around St Augustine's observations on the strange pleasure which human beings take in the artificial stimulation of grief and terror, insisting that of its nature tragedy has more to do with the *exhibition* of painful contradictions between the rational and the emotional than with their morally improving *resolution*: its characteristic effect, she argues, is never the self-satisfaction implicit in the rigorously didactic readings to which male critics have been especially prone, but a 'radical charity', a sense of 'tragic commonality' in the ills to which all human flesh is heir. There is nothing startling about these truths, of course, except the fact that

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most literary critics have learned to forget them. The strengths of Hawkins's criticism lie not only in her stubborn insistence on such neglected axioms, but in the exemplary emotional openness with which she is prepared to observe and describe her own response to a play like *The Broken Heart*. Her essay stands as a salutary reminder, in a collection that quite properly gives so much attention to the artifice of the plays, that Ford was in his own estimate an artist of the feelings, for whom all the ingenuities of 'words' could, in the end, do no more than 'clothe . . . the subject right', and whose deeper aim was to evoke 'a pity with delight'.

NOTES

- 1 Douglas Howard (ed.), *Philip Massinger: a Critical Reassessment* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 2 Apart from L. G. Salingar's essay in Boris Ford's much reprinted Pelican Guide, *The Age of Shakespeare* (London, Penguin Books, 1956), perhaps the most influential modern statements of Ford's 'decadence' have been T. B. Tomlinson's even more frankly Leavisite, *A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy* (Cambridge and Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1964) and David Frost's *The School of Shakespeare: The Influence of Shakespeare on English Drama, 1600–1642* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1968). Significantly, all three of the major studies of Ford since then – Mark Stavig's *John Ford and the Traditional Moral Order* (Madison, Milwaukee and London, University of Wisconsin Press, 1968); Ronald Huebert's *John Ford, Baroque English Dramatist* (Montreal and London, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977); and Dorothy Farr's *John Ford and the Caroline Theatre* (London, Macmillan, 1979) – have felt bound to define themselves against this position.
- 3 See D. K. Anderson, 'The Heart and the Banquet: Imagery in Ford's 'Tis Pity and *The Broken Heart*', *Studies in English Literature*, 2 (1962), 209–17.
- 4 'Forde's Contribution to the Decadence of the Drama', in W. Bang, *John Fordes Dramatiske Werke*, Materialien zur Kunde des älteren Englischen Dramas, Series I, vol.23 (Louvain, A. Uystpruyt, 1908), pp. xii–xiii.
- 5 Ann Jennalie Cook, *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare's London, 1576–1642* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981); Martin Butler, *Theatre and Crisis, 1632–1642* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984); Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987); Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980).
- 6 Dorothy M. Farr, *John Ford and the Caroline Theatre* (London, Macmillan, 1979), chap. 4, 'Reassessment of the *Othello* theme at the Phoenix in *Love's Sacrifice*'.

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Ford in Performance

ROGER WARREN

Ford has been less fortunate than other dramatists in the revival of seventeenth-century plays in the modern theatre. In 1962, for example, the first fully professional revivals of Ford's *The Broken Heart* and Middleton's *Women Beware Women* since the seventeenth century opened within a few days of one another. Bamber Gascoigne was representative of general critical response when he roundly declared that 'the Middleton turned out to be the only one ... to reward revival – though revival is far too weak a word for the bursting vitality of what we saw', whereas Ford provided a 'painful evening' (*The Spectator*, 20 July 1962). The failure of *The Broken Heart* can to some extent be explained by the unfortunate circumstances in which it was performed, as I shall show; but these do not wholly explain why Ford should have seemed so unsatisfying in direct comparison with Middleton, or why this contrast between their fortunes has continued, in a less extreme form, in the last twenty years. T. C. Worsley's review of that production of *Women Beware Women* (*The Financial Times*, 5 July 1962) pinned down the chief reason for Middleton's continuing success in the modern theatre: his 'very quiet, insistent, low-voiced tone' has parallels with contemporary drama which gives performances and audiences a 'way in' to Middleton's plays which on the whole they do not seem to have found for Ford's. Perhaps for this reason, professional revivals of Ford have been far rarer than for other seventeenth-century dramatists; but I shall attempt to describe in some detail how the directors and actors in those few productions have responded to the opportunities and problems that Ford presents, and what light these interpretations have shed upon the plays themselves.¹