

DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v2i2.225

The Moral Failure of the Women in John Ford's *Love's Sacrifice*

Merve AYDOĞDU*

Abstract

John Ford (1586-1639), who was among the final tragedians of the late English Renaissance, started his career with non-dramatic works and after various dramatic collaborations with Dekker and Heywood, he created three solo tragedies- namely 'Tis Pity She's a Whore, the Broken Heart and Love's Sacrifice- all of which gave clues about the human psychology. Ford employed the themes of love, adultery, desire and death in the afore-mentioned pieces and he always struggled to give his women the freedom their society deprived them of.

In Love's Sacrifice (1633), John Ford produces five women characters all of whom can fearlessly voice their feelings. The typical sixteenth/seventeenth century woman was supposed to be silent and submissive standing only in the domestic sphere allotted to her but Ford's female characters have been given a certain amount of freedom: the characters to be discussed never hesitate to externalize how they feel or they act in accordance with their wishes. On the one hand, the women can express their desires and Ford seems to favour them. On the other hand, however, he represents them with their defects and all of the women experience moral failure.

* Middle East Technical University, Faculty of Education, Department of Foreign Language Education.

The aim of this study, thus, is to show the ambivalent attitude of John Ford towards his women. Given the portrayal and consequences of the women's behaviour, it will be concluded that John Ford was a man of patriarchy and although he seemed to side with his women characters, he promoted the patriarchal order through *Love's Sacrifice*.

Keywords: Late English Renaissance, John Ford, *Love's Sacrifice*.

Introduction

Ford is especially interested in the human heart and rather than representing the society, he focuses upon the individual lives. Thus, in his plays, he deals with the themes of love, sexuality, jealousy, desire and revenge. He is very much influenced by Shakespeare's *Othello* particularly when composing *Love's Sacrifice* but he revitalizes the revenge tragedy genre with his brave treatment of taboo subjects such as incest. He quite often portrays himself as a man obsessed with love through his plays while he is also equally good at observing and understanding the human nature. Therefore,

Ford's plays are commonly studies of passion which is inclusive and destructive [...] His lovers may talk of passion in ideal terms, but there is always in them a full drive towards coition: it is this which commonly destroys them. (Leech, 10)

Ford is the keen observer of the people around him. Although he both seems to be ahead of his time thanks to his equal understanding of both sexes and struggles to give his women the freedom their society depraves them of, he is also a man of the seventeenth century and he is driven by its social rules. The aim of this study, thus, is to show the ambivalent attitude of John Ford towards his women in *Love's Sacrifice*. Given the portrayal and consequences of the women's behaviour, it will be concluded that Ford poses himself as a man of patriarchy and although he appears to side with his women characters, he reinforces the patriarchal order in the play representing his female figures as moral failures.

In *Love's Sacrifice*, set in Italy, Ford categorizes his characters under two headings, the women following the men: Bianca as the Duchess, Fiormonda as the Duke's sister, Colona as Petruccio's daughter, Julia as Nibrassa's daughter and Morona as the old lady

constitute the female cast. They share a common point in that all of these women can fearlessly voice their feelings and act in accordance with their wishes.

Ford creates space for each of them to taste *freedom* and their characterization is suggestive of their being beyond the age as the typical sixteenth/seventeenth century woman was supposed to be silent and submissive standing only in the domestic sphere allotted to her: “In theory, all household relationships were binary ones and these binaries were unequal: husbands and wives, with husbands over wives” (Orlin, 67). The women, still bearing the burden of the Original Sin, were considered the weaker vessel and they were thought to be lusty, irrational, and unreliable particularly in sexual matters. These prejudices were also reinforced with the help of religion: St. Paul remarked the husband to be the head of the wife (Ephesians, 5.23) and John Calvin preached that the woman and man are inseparable from each other. In Calvin’s view, the females represented the body while men were associated with mind and reason. In this context, what was expected of a wife/woman was to be chaste as she was also the one who was responsible for the good reputation of the house. The women had to be obedient since the female sexuality and male honour were interdependent. Women’s position was unquestionably inferior in the society and in the conduct manuals the ideal woman was presented as chaste, silent, obedient, nurturing and serving.

The portrayal of the women in *Love’s Sacrifice* seems quite the opposite of what would be decent and acceptable for them in the era the play was written. Ford attempts to allow his women freedom since they act in accordance with their wishes regardless of the consequences. Yet, he represents all his female characters quite negatively in the seventeenth century terms. For instance, Fiormonda is portrayed as a jealous, disloyal, vindictive, manipulative woman; Morona-Colona-Julia turn out to be easily seducible, vengeful murderers and Bianca commits adultery.

The Portrayal of Women

Among Fiormonda’s negative characteristics, hypocrisy precedes the others. Although she has been recently-widowed, she still pursues pleasure. She mourns for her dead husband in public yet she is after Fernando in private. Fernando tries to remind her of the dead husband to stop her advances yet Fiormonda does not hesitate to confess her feelings and offers her ring as a token of love. The ring belongs to her husband symbolizing loyalty but Fiormonda proves herself ready to give in to Fernando’s love. Indeed, she claims that “her blood is not yet freezed” (I.II.154) and kisses Fernando on the lips. She is a woman driven by her passion, she is sexually aroused and she does not feel shame trying to seduce his

brother's best friend. On the surface, Ford might attempt to show that she is still young and that it is natural that she needs to be loved. However, Fiormonda does not approach Fernando with innocence. Ford tries to create an active, single-minded woman conscious of what she is doing but Fiormonda stands out as a voluptuous, inconsiderate one. Besides, she shatters the sanctity of the marital bond with her offering the ring. She is meant to be autonomous yet she ends up being irrational, disloyal and unreliable.

Fernando's rejection arouses jealous feelings in her, which the Christian moralists considered as the cauldron of hatred, death and evil. Juan Luis Vives thought that jealousy has "the capacity to transform humans into most ferocious beasts" (Wagschal, 7) and Fiormonda demonstrates such a jealous attitude. She cannot accept the fact that Fernando does not like her and she does not face the reality with dignity. If Fiormonda were a mature and an understanding woman, she would be able to appreciate Fernando's decision. However, her jealousy and over ambition urge her to search the reasons. Learning that Fernando is in love with another woman inflames her motives of jealousy and revenge. She tries to destroy the man she cannot possess; she desires to capture him dead or alive. Fiormonda should have respected Fernando's feelings but far from doing so she decides to take "brave revenge" (II.II.221) because of her unrequited love. Fiormonda resolves

To stir up tragedies as black as brave,
And send the lecher panting to his grave. (II.III.127-8)

Fiormonda takes a vow of revenge and, to achieve her aim, she does not hesitate to manipulate her cuckolded brother. Reminding him of the Italian blood they have in their veins and of their great ancestors, Fiormonda triggers her brother to seek vengeance because he has been a cuckold by his wife with the man she loves. Calvin preaches that the woman represents the body while the man represents the mind but Fiormonda reverses the situation acting as the *mind* directing her brother what to do. It may be applaudable that Fiormonda can even control her brother- the head of the dukedom- with her eloquent, persuasive speech yet she is out of reason merely driven by her blood-thirsty instincts:

...
Now boys will sing thy scandal in the streets,
Tune ballads to thy infamy, get money
By making pageants of thee, and invent
Some strangely shaped man-beast that may for horns
Resemble thee, and call it Pavy's duke. (IV.I.34-8)

Fiormonda might have been a typical seventeenth century woman nurturing, serving and silent but Ford creates a self-sufficient, powerful one who serves only for her own benefits. It might be possible to celebrate her strong disposition yet Fiormonda's exaggerated, revenge-thirsty characterization only makes her a repulsive woman. Ford seems to address the question whether it is better to be silent or powerful through building her personality. He degrades the character he has created portraying her like an arrant *femme-fatale*.

To reinforce his indistinct argument against women, Ford creates three easily seducible characters- namely Julia, Morona and Colona as well. These women –the female murderers of *Love's Sacrifice*- fall prey to Ferentes' advances principally because of their unreliable sexual inclinations. Even from the beginning, Ferentes has been depicted as the wanton courtier "whose pride takes pride in nothing more than to delight his lust" (I.I.97-98) but the women just seem to ignore this fact and he can easily seduce them all with the discourse of *fake* love. Ferentes never believes in genuine love, rather he considers it as a trade but he can impregnate three women because they are so *naively* taken in by his sweet promises of marriage. For instance, Julia is suspicious of Ferentes' profligacy yet she still prefers to believe in his love. The fact that the women are so easily deceived by Ferentes can be associated with Calvin's sermon. In Julia-Colona-Morona case, the women are defeated by their passionate side and they are unable to use their reason in deciding how to behave. They contribute to the assumption that the female sex is easy to seduce, lusty and sexually unreliable.

If the women did not seek vengeance or they repented, they could have created pity now that they have been victimized by a lustful man. The reader might have sympathized with them thanks to Ford's composition. For instance, he might have sent the penitent women to a convent or he might have added some scenes showing their prayers to be forgiven. However, Ford's depiction shows them neither repenting nor feeling sorry for what they have done. Contrarily, they decide to seek revenge with their fathers' encouragement. Indeed, Ford deliberately gives the women freedom to act as they wish and the fathers allow them to behave with their own *will*. The women, however, cannot make a rational decision and plots against Ferentes. Bloodshed is a greater sin than adultery, and rather than bitterly regretting for their sin, they also defy God's rule preaching that "thou shalt not kill" (Exodus, 20.13) Thus, the three *victims*, who are so easily taken in by his charming love, turn out to be the cunning schemers to murder Ferentes. On the one hand, they subvert the common belief of the age considering women to be weak, passive creatures since they display their ability to plot, their strength to retaliate just as Hopkins remarks that "[Ford] represents women with

great sympathy, consistently allotting to them what his culture as a whole did not” (107). On the other hand, his struggle to represent them positively just ends up in a quite opposite way: one cannot help but label them as blood-thirsty adulteresses.

Love's Sacrifice hosts another adulteress –Bianca- as well. Bianca, meaning white in Italian, is supposed to be the paragon of purity and innocence -she has been probably named to bear these features- but she cheats on her husband who has married her despite the “strict opinion and severe dispute” (I.I.180) of his senate. The Duke and Bianca belong to different social classes but he does not hesitate to marry her. Bianca ascends in social scale, she has been given the title of the “Duchess” and she possesses a royal husband though none of which can prevent her from indulging in an adulterous relationship.

Bianca might have been portrayed as a grateful wife for what she has achieved through marriage but she proves vice versa. Indeed, Ford speaking through D'Avolos foreshadows Bianca's betrayal and expresses his opinion on the woman sexuality:

So, via! To be cuckold –mercy and providence!- is as natural to a married man as to eat, sleep or wear a nightcap. Friends? I will rather trust mine arm in the throat of a lion, my purse with a courtesan, my neck with the chance on a die, or my religion in a synagogue of Jews, than my wife with a friend. (II.III.104-9)

Bianca's characterization does not fit in the ideal depiction of a seventeenth century woman. She could have been a devout, kind wife eager to have babies but Ford represents Bianca as a sexually insatiable, error-prone one. Although the Duke's best friend confesses his love for her three times, she never tells it to her husband implying that she takes delight in another man's courting. She vows to be a faithful wife yet she does not conform to the matrimonial rules. She soon embarks on the role of a seducer and visits Fernando late at night in her night mantle. Her inconstancy affirms the bias that the women are untrustworthy.

In fact, her constitution as a whole might be celebrated as a rebellion against the male authority warning women to be submissive all the time: for example, William Whately in *A Bride-Bush* (1617) advises women to accept their inferior status:

If thou purpose to be a good wife, and to live comfortably, set down this with thy self:
My husband is my superior, my better. (qtd. in Keeble, 151)

Bianca tries to go against the patriarchal system which does not leave her a room of her own only forcing her to devote herself to her husband and children. The social system does not let her possess anything; the things she has belong either to her father or to her

husband but in order to achieve her aim, Bianca makes use of the only thing she has control over: her body. The body also belongs to her husband yet the intellectual Bianca tries to defeat her husband with the most precious thing they both think belonging to themselves. Bianca –that is, Ford- builds up a strong, self-sufficient personality conscious of what she is doing with her wisely-planned, rebellious attitude. However, Bianca destroys her admirable self when she publicly insults her husband, an act which is rather humiliating and intolerable:

What ails you?

Can you imagine, sir, the name of Duke

Could make a crooked leg, a scrambling foot,

A tolerable face, a wearish hand,

A bloodless lip, or such an untrimmed beard

As yours fit for a lady's pleasure? No. (V.I.71-6)

If she repented of committing adultery or if she asked for forgiveness from God and her husband, she might have gained the readers' sympathy but Bianca puts the blame on her husband because of her own crime. Impenitent, shameless and insolent, Bianca proves herself to be a thankless woman. Ford deliberately tears down what he has created. Bianca is meant to be an independent character to only serve Ford's patriarchal purposes.

Conclusion

John Ford lives at a time when the society is strictly patriarchal in which the general idea about the women is quite negative. Earning his bread out of writing, Ford seems to have no choice but to follow its rules or to verify its assumptions. Therefore, all his female characters morally fail: Fiormonda manifests herself an overambitious, jealous, vindictive woman; Julia-Morona-Colona shed blood because of their vengeful intentions, and Bianca cheats on her husband who has presented her a prosperous life. Women's transgression of moral precepts eventually requires punishment. Fiormonda marries Roseilli but he banishes her from the nuptial bed so that she can purge her sins; Julia and Colona are sent to the prison; Morona is expelled from the dukedom and Bianca, stabbed by her husband, lies dead. Bianca is killed on stage so that "[t]he murder of the transgressive wife and the display of her corpse provide an 'exercise in terror,' making women aware of the unlimited power of men" (Yarbro-Bejarano, 8). Similarly, Roseilli claims his superiority over Fiormonda; Morona gets married to another man to take care of her; and Colona-Julia are left helpless without paternal

compassion. Ford punishes his female cast to serve as a warning to other women. Portraying different women with common personality traits such as being strong, self-sufficient, independent and active, Ford attempts to give them a certain amount of freedom but he turns these positive qualities upside down only ending up promoting the common beliefs of the era about the women. Consequently, *Love's Sacrifice* turns out to be a vehicle by which Ford displays his ambivalence towards women.

Bibliography

- Ford, John. (2002). *Love's Sacrifice*. Ed. A. T. Moore. Manchester: Manchester UP, Print.
- Hopkins, Lisa. (2002). *The Female Hero in English Renaissance Tragedy*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, Print
- Keeble, N. H., comp. and ed. (1994). *The Cultural Identity of Seventeenth-century Woman: A Reader*. London: Routledge, Print.
- Leech, Clifford. (1957). *John Ford and the Drama of His Time*. London: Chatto & Windus, Print.
- Orlin, Lena Cowen. (2009). *The Renaissance: A Sourcebook*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Print.
- Wagschal, Steven. (2007). *Literature of Jealousy in the Age of Cervantes*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, Print.
- Yarbro-Bejarano, Yvonne. (1994). *Feminism and the Honor Plays of Lope de Vega*. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, Print.