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The presentation and representation of love in terms of incest in John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and in Montaigne's 'On affectionate relationships'

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In Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, Giovanni attempts to dismiss the potential social disapproval to be felt in the face of the incestuous relationship he shares with his sister Annabella by declaring, 'when they but know / Our loves, that love will wipe away that rigour / Which would in other incests be abhorred.'[1] It is questionable however, whether the love shared by the central protagonists can so easily excuse the breaking of the incest taboo, and it has certainly provoked an array of critical and audience responses as to the degree of morality with which their love is presented. To create tragic momentum and ensure a degree of audience sympathy their relationship must be considered as a credible form of love, albeit a flawed credible one.[2] Ford employs various techniques in order to achieve this, such as the type of language used by the characters as well as the motivations and reasons they provide in an attempt to place incest within a recognisable framework of love. 'On affectionate relationships' turns to Montaigne's personal relationship with deceased friend Etienne de La Boëtie in order to define various types of '*amitié*'. Whilst Montaigne focuses upon friendship and makes no reference to incestuous love, his descriptions of the ideal relationship in which two 'souls mingled and confounded'[3] offers a model against which other types of affection can be compared. The relationship between Giovanni and Annabella blurs the boundaries between Montaigne's categorizations of love as the discourses used to locate it within a familiar model are simultaneously undermined by the language and dramatic actions of the play. Yet even Montaigne is unable to sustain such rigid distinctions within his essay. The inability to classify forms of love, particularly such an ambiguous form as incestuous love, seems to arise from the conflicting causes of affection, whether they are external or internal, fate or will.

In order to exalt the 'loving friendship' (p. 207) enjoyed with deceased friend La Boëtie, Montaigne first discusses the limits upon other forms of love. According to Montaigne, the love shared between family members is innately inferior to friendship as 'they are loving relationships commanded by the law and the bonds of nature, there is less of our own choice, less 'willing freedom' (p. 208). Such relationships then are imposed upon us by the dictates of society by 'law', as well as by nature itself. For Montaigne these 'bonds' create a sense of 'obligation' which hinders affection (p.207). In anthropological discourse the reasons often cited for the incest prohibition include the natural instinct to prevent

[1] John Ford, 'Tis Pity She's a Whore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), V.v.71-3. Further references are given after quotations in the text.
[2] A. L. Kirstner and M. K. Kirstner, 'The Dramatic Functions of Love in the Tragedies of John Ford', Studies in Philology, Vol. 70, No. 1 (1973), 62-76 (p. 64).
[3] Michel de Montaigne, 'On affectionate relationships', in The Complete Essays, trans. M. A. Screech (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), pp. 203-219 (p. 211). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

biological degeneration and the need to enlarge social groups through marriage outside the nuclear family.[4] Those ties which restrict familial love according to Montaigne, also act as preventative measures in the case of the incest taboo. In Ford's play however, Giovanni inverts such reasoning to present such natural 'bonds' as a positive rather than restrictive force upon the love he feels for his sister:

> Wise Nature first in your creation meant
> To make you mine: else't had been sin and foul
> To share one beauty to a double soul.
> Nearness in birth or blood doth but persuade
> A nearer nearness in affection (I.ii.226-230).

The personification of nature is juxtaposed with the Platonic image of the 'double soul', still to be found in the contemporary notion of 'soul mates', and with the religious rhetoric of damnation, 'sin and foul', in order to invert such discourses and depict incestuous love as a natural inclination. Read alongside Montaigne, such reasoning seems to be a literalized and extreme misreading of the statement that, 'there seems to be nothing for which Nature has better prepared us than for fellowship' (p. 207). However, Giovanni's own language seems to betray his declaration, as the repetition of 'nearness' and its further use through the transition to 'near' suggests that he is trying to persuade himself, as well as his sister, as to the legitimacy of their sexual love. In his essay Montaigne alludes to a remark originating from a story involving Plutarch to underline the arbitrary and irrelevant importance of 'birth and blood' as cause for affection: '"He matters no more to me for coming out of the same hole"' (p. 208). This rather crude citation is turned on its head by Giovanni:

> Say that we had one father, say one womb
> (Curse to my joys) gave both us life and birth;
> Are we not therefore each to the other bound
> So much the more by nature; by the links
> Of blood, of reason? Nay, if you will have't,
> Even of religion, to be ever one:
> One soul, one flesh, one love, one heart, one all? (I.i.28-34)

Montaigne's 'bonds' become 'links of blood, of reason'. The conflation of 'reason', 'blood', and 'even religion', is rather precarious, yet whilst for Plutarch's acquaintance the 'same hole' has negative connotations here it is seen as an engendering force. Thus, the 'one womb' that gave birth to the lovers is echoed in the culmination of Giovanni's rhetorical question. This 'one' of the mother is repeated in the catalogue of elements which similar origins have led the siblings to share. These alternate between the spiritual or abstract, 'one soul' and 'one love', and the physical, 'one flesh' and 'one heart', until finally the all encompassing 'womb' is reduced to the totality of the 'one all'. According to A. P. Hogan the use of nature, reason and religion as justifications are not sustained in the rest of the play as, 'Ford gradually and inexorably shreds the *grande alliance* which his hero has so laboriously built up'.[5] Indeed, the attempt to justify love in such terms is undermined here both by dramatic gesture and language in the aside, '(curse to my joys)'. As Susan Wiseman points out, the presentation of love in *'Tis Pity* 'operates in tension with the audience's knowledge of the confounding of nature and culture, self and other, which takes place in the

[4] Bruce Thomas Boehrer, Monarchy and Incest in Renaissance England: Literature, Culture, Kinship, and Kingship (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 22-7.
[5] A. P. Hogan, 'Tis Pity She's a Whore: The Overall Design', Studies in English Literature, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1977), 303-316 (p. 305).

incestuous act'.[6] As Giovanni's aside indicates though, he too is aware of the tension between socially accepted views of incest and his justifications, it is a disparity which remains almost unacknowledged – in parenthesis – at the base of his reasoning.

'Wise Nature', then, is presented, albeit unconvincingly, by Giovanni as an innate motivation for incestuous love. The association between this 'natural' cause and its result is seemingly strengthened by nature imagery, particularly that of water, employed to portray his love as an unstoppable force: 'It were more ease to stop the ocean / From floats and ebbs, than to dissuade my vows' (I.i.64-5). Yet the concept of nature as an overwhelming external force is contradicted by the sense of the self implied by the affirmative tone of the statement and by the possessive pronoun of 'my vows'. Indeed, the self-prophesying nature of this phrase can be seen when the vows are later realized by the siblings. Such contradiction raises the question as to whether love, and particularly such an ambiguous form of love, can be attributed to external forces such as fate or to the internal will of the individual. For Montaigne, 'willing freedom' and 'choice' are declared to be defining features of both sexual relations and friendship, in contrast to the 'obligation' to love family members. However, this stance is soon undermined by Montaigne as he describes his meeting La Boëtie as due to 'some decree of Heaven' (p. 212). Here chance and fate, not choice appear to play the pivotal role:

> If you press me to say why I loved him, I feel that it cannot be expressed except by replying: "Because it was him, because it was me." Mediating this union there was, beyond all my reasoning, beyond all that I can say specifically about it, some inexplicable force of destiny. (p. 212)

Montaigne's personal experience does not seem to adhere to his 'philosophical' definitions of friendship. If actual affection in terms of friendship is 'inexplicable', and 'beyond reason' perhaps Giovanni's conflicting attempts to explain one of the most incomprehensible manifestations of love cannot be judged so harshly. Indeed, according to Roland Barthes, love cannot be objectively defined by those in love: 'I'd be glad to know what it is, but being inside, I see it in existence, not in essence'.[7] Similarly, Giovanni's attempts to make the inexplicable explicable ultimately ring false. A prime example of this can be found in Act II scene 5 which consists of a debate between the friar and Giovanni soon after he has seduced his sister. In this passage Giovanni's warped reasoning, as well as the topic of incest itself, is masked by the seemingly rational structure of Giovanni's argument. The conjunctions and structures typical of hypothesis, 'If hers to me, then so is mine to her; / Since in like causes are effects alike', and the repetition of words from one point of the argument into the next, 'My sister's beauty, being rarely fair, / Is rarely virtuous; chiefly in her love, / And chiefly in that love, her love to me' (II.v.22-6), create a unity and logic which belie Giovanni's theme. It is up to the friar, ever the pragmatist, to highlight this disparity with his exclamation, 'O ignorance in knowledge!' (II.v.27). It could be argued that such conflicts are created not only by the ambiguity of love and its motivating forces, but also by the dubious nature of man's reason.[8] Certainly, this distrust of reason and dogmatic discourses is a view espoused by Montaigne in the *Essays*, in which the often sceptical character of his 'thought-experiments'[9]

[6] Susan J. Wiseman, '"Tis Pity She's a Whore: Representing the incestuous body', in Renaissance Bodies: The human figure in English culture c. 1540-1660, ed. by Lucy Gent and Nigel Llewellyn (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), pp. 180-197 (pp. 181-186).
[7] Roland Barthes, A lover's discourse: Fragments, trans. Richard Howard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990) p. 59.
[8] I. D. McFarlane and Ian Maclean, Montaigne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 108.
[9] Terence Cave, How to read Montaigne (London: Granta Books, 2007), p. 3.

leads to a tendency to reject imposing his own or other established overarching judgements upon others:[10] 'Reason does nothing but go astray in everything'.[11]

According to the language of the lovers in *'Tis Pity*, it is destiny which appears to dictate the course of their love, thus Giovanni continually declares, 'my fate's my god' (I.i.80). Such a conception of fate is a decidedly pagan one. Larry Champion argues that pagan imagery and 'celestial comparisons evoke responses in the spectator free from the moral attitudes associated with Christianity' thereby highlighting the conflicting moral values of the characters and the society in which they are located.[12] However, he fails to recognise the role of celestial imagery in representing the will of the heavens: 'Would thou hadst been less subject to those stars / That luckless reigned at my nativity!' (V.i.19-20). The referents and connotations of such imagery shift throughout the play. In this lament for her brother's fate Annabella depicts herself as the medium through which the stars wrought the disastrous consequences of the incestuous affair. Yet it is Giovanni to whom she previously applies celestial imagery as she praises his appearance before realising his true identity: 'blessed shape [...] celestial creature' (I.ii.121-2). This shift in association could suggest that it is in fact Giovanni who is the true agent of 'fate', or perhaps more appropriately, of will: 'I should; and will, yes will' (I.ii.233). The emphatic repetition here affirms Giovanni's choice to proceed in the seduction of his sister. The friar echoes the notion that incestuous love is an act of will through the language of Christian damnation, which also has appropriate undertones of the petrarchan image of excessive desire as fire: 'thy wilful flames' (I.i.66).

Montaigne's definition of romantic love as being 'born of our own choice' (p. 208) is taken to an extreme in *'Tis Pity* as Giovanni claims dominion over fate and Annabella, despite previous claims that ''tis not I know, / My lust, but 'tis my fate that leads me on' (I.ii.148-9). This can be seen in the 'king' imagery employed towards his sister when, at the final banquet for example, he describes himself as 'the happy monarch of her heart and her' (V.vi.45), the idea of the heart here having both metaphorical and literal meanings. Such language points back to an earlier image used in response to Soranzo who, when attempting to woo Annabella, asks who she will love: 'That's as the fates infer' (III.ii.17). However, an aside by Giovanni, 'Of those I'm regent now', reveals to the audience that it is not an otherworldly force which is in control of the 'fates', but her brother. It must be noted of course that such claims to sovereignty over destiny are self-proclaimed and thus suggest more about Giovanni's own sense of self than about the motivations of love, yet this in turn can be read as an element of Ford's ambivalent characterization of a protagonist who submits to incestuous affection: 'Why, I hold fate / Clasped 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). Here Giovanni appropriates a god-like role as he grasps the dagger with which he will control his sibling's fate. This remark is also noteworthy as it provides added connotations to the ocean imagery found in the opening scene of the play. Whereas Giovanni had proclaimed that love was as unstoppable as the 'ebbs' of the sea, in this instance he applies the image to his sister in regard to her constancy. Whilst this strengthens the association between the idea of inescapable love and the figure of Annabella as the object of such love, it also highlights the more traditional tale of female inconstancy. Such

[10] Peter Burke, Montaigne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 14. There are conflicting arguments as to the sceptical nature of Montaigne's work. These are discussed further by Ann Hartle, 'Montaigne and Skepticism', in The Cambridge Companion to Montaigne, ed. by Ullrich Langer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp.183-206.

[11] Michel de Montaigne, 'Apology for Raymond Sebond', in The Complete Works of Montaigne, trans. Donald M. Frame (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1958), pp. 318-457 (p. 386).

[12] Larry S. Champion, 'Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore and the Jacobean Tragic Perspective', PMLA, Vol. 90, No. 1 (1975), 78-87 (p. 82).

misogynistic tendencies, it seems, are equally applicable to incestuous love as to any other more socially acceptable form.[13]

Giovanni's 'self-deification'[14] is not presented as a result of his incestuous passion and the obstacles which stand in the way of it, instead it is inherent in his love from the start: 'Thus hung Jove on Leda's neck, / And sucked divine ambrosia from her lips.' (II.i.16-7). Such classical allusions are often found in the hyperbolic language of courtly love, one of the many discourses of love into which the incestuous affair attempts to locate itself. This classical allusion occurs after the sibling's first sexual encounter, and as Hogan points out, the references to 'Jove' and 'ambrosia' the nectar of the gods, suggest the apparent power of Giovanni.[15] This image has further significance however, since the myth of Jove and Leda portrays an unnatural coupling between a mortal and a god in the form of a swan, thereby paralleling the 'unnatural' union of brother and sister. Furthermore, the violence, for it is a story of rape, whilst not applicable to the seduction of Annabella - who is very much portrayed as willingly acquiescing to Giovanni - does point to her tragic demise. In the death and marriage-bed scene Giovanni plays god by taking her life, an action which he subsequently proclaims to be a 'rape of life and beauty' (V.vi.19). Again it must be noted that such actions are not merely presented as specifically intrinsic aspects of incestuous love because Soranzo also depicts himself as the subject of self-deification: 'And what I am, a husband; in that name / is hid divinity' (IV.iii.135-6).

If Giovanni is 'regent' of Annabella and their shared fate, then the equality seemingly suggested by the Platonic imagery of 'one soul [...] one all' at the start of the play becomes defunct. Indeed, this unified image gradually slips to the plural thereby denoting the individuality of the two lovers, 'two united hearts like hers and mine' (V.iii.12), until Giovanni finally stands alone: 'Be all man, my soul' (V.iii.74). The possessive pronoun highlights the 'hyper masculine subjectivity'[16] expressed here. This image of the self as distinct from the other is at odds with Montaigne's descriptions of the perfect union between souls in which 'souls are mingled and confounded in so universal a blending that they efface the seam which joins them together so that it cannot be found' (p. 211-2). For Montaigne, such unity 'involves a merging of the self and of possessions, thus 'I say 'lose myself' in very truth; we kept nothing back for ourselves: nothing was his or mine' (p. 212). This sense of shared possession goes some way to pardoning Giovanni's hold over his sister, whose 'captive heart' (I.ii.236) is possessively regarded in his imperative command, 'keep well my heart' (II.i.32) and later literally seized in the final act. However, this possessiveness is not a reciprocal act; Giovanni and Annabella are not, as Montaigne claims of himself and La Boëtie, 'halves' (p. 217), but are a 'pair of souls' (II.v.69).

In line with the contradictory nature of Montaigne's works, it is debateable whether he can maintain the equality with which he distinguishes friendship from other forms of love, which he claims are marked by an 'excessive inequality' (p. 207). Nancy Frelick suggests that because the object of Montaigne's affection is absent, La Boëtie becomes 'a kind of projection-screen for the subject's desires'.[17] The references to petrarchan love poetry cause the essay to give way to a discourse of desire, the discourse of passionate love which he defines as 'but a mad craving for something which escapes us' (p. 209). Montaigne's slippage into the language of courtly love highlights the inability of categorising types of

[13] Wiseman, in Renaissance Bodies p. 186.
[14] Hogan, 'The Overall Design', p. 307.
[15] Hogan, 'The Overall Design, p. 307.
[16] Mario DiGangi, 'John Ford', in A companion to Renaissance drama, ed. by Arthur F. Kinney (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 567-583 (p. 577).
[17] Nancy Frelick, 'Friendship, transference and voluntary servitude: Montaigne and La Boëtie', in Le visage changeant de Montaigne – The changing face of Montaigne (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2003), pp. 195-206 (p. 195).

relationships, whether they are incestuous or not, as its ambivalence seems to defy such rigid definitions. Just as Giovanni projects his desire onto, and lays claim to, Annabella's body, her heart and her unborn child, it could be argued that Montaigne has possession over his friend's offspring, 'On willing slavery' or the sonnets, if they are viewed in the classical sense of intellectual works as a form of procreation. If such a line of argument is to be followed then possession indicates an ulterior motive – desire and the self – which Montaigne declares alien to his ideal model of spiritual love in which 'there is no traffic or commerce but with itself' (p. 209).

This focus on the self as a driving force, in the case of both Giovanni and Montaigne, has been likened to a modern form of individualism.[18] Giovanni's decision to pursue his incestuous feelings towards Annabella has been considered to be the 'egocentric defiance of external values,'[19] and has been interpreted by some critics as a rebellion against society. Whereas relationships are not presented as contrary to social harmony by Montaigne - although admittedly this claim stems from a defence of La Boëtie in light of the reaction to his 'On willing slavery' - the society of Parma in *'Tis Pity* is conspicuously devoid of any harmony existing outside, or even inside, personal relationships. The corruption which pervades this social world is highlighted by Florio, one of the few sympathetically portrayed characters in *'Tis Pity:* 'Justice is fled to Heaven and comes no nearer' (III.ix.62). As Boehrer claims it could be argued that, 'Ford's characters have to create justice and moral value for themselves'.[20] Certainly, the other models of love, or 'lust and pride' (IV.i.99), in the play offer no appealing alternative to the siblings, a device which by way of contrast increases audience sympathy for the young lovers. It is questionable as to whether the failings of society can excuse the incestuous affair, although it does add another more subtle element of external force to the already ambiguous and conflicting motivations for such a form of love.

Giovanni's depiction of incestuous love in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* attempts to place it within familiar discourses and attribute to it recognizable motivations. The ambiguity of such a type of relationship however is revealed in the conflicting language, characterization and dramatic gestures of the protagonists. Love evades the categorisations outlined by Montaigne and the suggested justifications of Ford's characters, leading to a blurring of boundaries and a consistently ambivalent and contradictory representation of affection which is complicated further by the notions of external and internal driving forces, the establishment of equality and the role of the self.

[18] Boehrer, Monarchy and Incest p. 125.
[19] Champion, 'Jacobean Tragic Perspective' p. 79.
[20] Boehrer, Monarchy and Incest p. 122.

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