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The Power of “Parity” in Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*

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Readers of *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* have long agreed that the social milieu of John Ford’s tale of sibling incest is one of profound hypocrisy and deceit. The play openly examines brother-sister incest (it is the first English drama to do so) within the context of several intricate subplots involving adultery, revenge, and murder, none of which the city’s authorities do anything to ameliorate—indeed, both the ineffectual Friar and “opportunist” Cardinal¹ manage to exacerbate Parma’s difficulties. As Verna Foster writes, the decorous veneer of Parmesan society masks a propensity toward “illicit sex and the violence of revenge,”² so that incest can be said to stem from the effort to achieve integrity of purpose in a world in which “it is demonstrably impossible to live uncorrupted.”³ From this point of view, transgression occurs not so much because Giovanni and Annabella are themselves morally degenerate, but because they are each other’s only possible choices for spiritual and intellectual connection in a culture dominated by a host of dubious figures—the adulterous Soranzo and Hippolita, the murderer Grimaldi, the foolish Bergetto, and the schemer Vasques. Richard McCabe concurs: brother and sister find in their incestuous union “two lovers better suited to one another than to any rival claimants.”⁴ At the same time, however, Giovanni and Annabella’s affair troubles the society that produces it, exaggerating a refusal of paternalism and a privileging of the private sphere (both the newly defined interior space of Calvin and Descartes⁵ and the physical domain of the Protestant household) that shifted the contours

1. Dorothy M. Farr, *John Ford and the Caroline Theater* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979), p. 53.

2. Verna Foster, “*’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* as City Tragedy,” in *John Ford: Critical Re-Visions*, ed. Michael Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 181–200, quotation at p. 192.

3. Foster, “*’Tis*,” p. 193.

4. Richard McCabe, *Incest, Drama, and Nature’s Law 1550–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), p. 232.

5. McCabe writes of seventeenth-century notions of “mental space” that “In so far as ‘any place whatever, wherever we may be, or can convey ourselves in imagination’ may legitimately be conceived as the central point relative to which we define our position, every mind becomes potentially the centre of its own moral and psychological universe, an isolated, subjective centre wandering amidst infinite space and time with no fixed point of reference beyond that of its own consciousness” (*Incest*, p. 240).

of early seventeenth-century English life, and that may have seemed to presage the kind of social upheaval feared by royalist sympathizers just prior to the outbreak of civil war.

The idea that incest is both cause and effect of chaos—the inevitable result of a world without centralized rulership, and an excessive show of loyalty to individual passion that disrupts civil rule—informs much of the scholarship on *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, and is the basis of Bruce Boehrer's compelling study of the incest theme in early modern culture.⁶ Boehrer suggests that incest acts as a “metonymy” for an originary wholeness lost at the moment of entering into the symbolic order of law and language, a way of recapturing, or at least fabricating, a prior state of absolute power and identity. The split between a desire for total self-presence, on the one hand, and the need for others to guarantee that identity, on the other, is particularly acute for early modern British kings and queens whose very status as monarchs was founded on the assertion of an “identity-of-the-same,” but who were also beholden to foreign others as marriage and economic partners. Exogamy, then—entrance into the world of “others”—is both necessary and offensive to the ruler who claims “I am unto myself.” Incest, in turn—a repudiation of those others—is both seductive and threatening to one whose political security can only be achieved through extrafamilial and transnational alliances.

Boehrer argues that Caroline drama deploys incest rhetoric as a cautionary tale against the consolidation of power within the private domain. Charles I's insistence on maintaining absolute boundaries around himself as the head of his own household as well as of the nation⁷ created an uncomfortable contradiction. In his attempt to solidify the royal family against his father's infamous blurring of its borders,⁸ Charles proclaimed its imperviousness to anything external to itself, which paradoxically rendered him especially vulnerable to even more vigorous accusations of incestuousness. This may be one reason why drama sympathetic to Charles works so strenuously to present incest as an invasive insinuation from outside the

6. Bruce Boehrer, *Monarchy and Incest in Renaissance England: Literature, Culture, Kinship, and Kingship* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

7. Such insistence is neatly encapsulated by Charles I's pseudo-explanation for dissolving Parliament in 1629: “princes are not bound to give account of their actions but to God alone.” Quoted in Charles Carlton, *Charles I: The Personal Monarch* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 121.

8. James was, of course, widely disfavored for blatant favoritism, and he had a habit of casting his relations to such figures as Elizabeth and Buckingham in incestuous terms. Boehrer argues that endogamy “could become something like a refuge from the perils of illicit exogamy” for James; “by fabricating a network of adoptive family relations within the court, James could counterbalance and (on the mythic level, at least) neutralize the rumor that he had no real family of his own” (*Monarchy*, p. 88). Thus James habitually referred to himself as Elizabeth's son and brother and to Buckingham as his child and even his wife.

royal circle, and why a play like Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* might seem to present a rulerless world as one of uncontrolled violence. Claiming that Ford was invested in the social system exemplified by Charles's notorious assertions of divine right and judicial control, Boehrer contends that *'Tis Pity* "explores what might happen if the individual nuclear family were to be assigned independent value as a political unit—if it were to be dissociated from the language of royal absolutism and viewed as a perfectly self-contained political entity."⁹ The play dramatizes for Boehrer the danger of families governing themselves within their own intimate spaces, a privilege that Caroline policy granted to the monarch alone.

Boehrer's trenchant account of incest rhetoric is useful because it attends to incest as a specific psychical and cultural event, rather than glossing over endogamous desire as a more generalized symbol for "all fundamental challenges to religious, moral and social authority."¹⁰ Yet the claim that incestuous love in *'Tis Pity* is the "catastrophic" result of an absence of centralized rule entails several problematic assumptions. First, it insists that the play endorses courtly values: Boehrer describes Ford as being "of the royalist persuasion" and argues that the play's function is largely didactic, "a mechanism of political surveillance and regulation" designed to warn the audience about various threats to civilized society both within themselves and within their culture.¹¹ Such a reading raises the question of whether a stable political position can be confidently ascertained about a playwright whom scholars have alternately deemed both a committed royalist and a skeptic of political absolutism, a supporter as well as a critic of conventional gender roles, a "moralist" and a "modernist" alike.¹² Harriet Hawkins notes that "an outstanding characteristic of scholarly and critical discussions of Ford is the tendency towards antithetical positions," and Rowland Wymer similarly contends that Ford's "political and religious views are not easily deducible from his works."¹³ There is also the issue of ascribing to the play an overly resolute conclusion, particularly since incest can be seen, as Boehrer himself explains, as both a renunciation of *and* "a form of" paternalistic, absolutist control, precisely because it protects the subject from the disintegrating effects of exogamy.¹⁴

Furthermore, I would argue that Ford's Parma hardly lacks a paternal-

9. Boehrer, *Monarchy*, p. 125.

10. Rowland Wymer, *Webster and Ford* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 123.

11. Boehrer, *Monarchy*, p. 126.

12. Inga-Stina Ewbank, *English Drama (Excluding Shakespeare): Select Bibliographical Guides*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), p. 113.

13. Harriet Hawkins, "Mortality, Morality, and Modernity in *The Broken Heart*: Some Dramatic and Critical Counter-Arguments," in Neill, ed., *John Ford*, pp. 129–52, quotation at 132; Wymer, *Webster*, p. 103.

14. Boehrer, *Monarchy*, p. 146.

istic social structure—a “knowing,” naming father—to call its citizens into subjecthood and to guide their behavior. Critics have suggested that because there is no clearly defined set of rules in place, the characters are forced to narrate their own ethical and spiritual systems, and that by taking matters of justice into their own hands, they open themselves and each other to their irrational impulses. When Giovanni and Annabella blatantly refuse to submit to their father’s will in preference of their own, eschewing all external law (in a city apparently already suffering from the absence of effective social regulation), they may seem to manifest the danger of families left too much to themselves, publicly flaunting their private activities even while refusing to account for them. According to Boehrer, incestuous love thus exhibits anxiety about the social menaces that threatened Caroline political absolutism. But I would counter that Parma is in fact full of lawful father-figures, including the Friar and the Cardinal; Annabella and Giovanni’s father Florio; the play’s two uncles, Donado and Richardetto; the servant-holding Soranzo and Bergetto; a handful of officers and banditti; and, in an emphatically literal, visible way, Giovanni himself. Each of these characters embodies and exerts patriarchal power, and while they may seem to behave irrationally or inconsistently, they are never truly outside phallogocentric law. The roles men act out in Parma are fully legible by the rules of patriarchy, which authorizes even their most seemingly disruptive acts. To the extent that, as Ira Clark has pointed out, “the father’s dominion . . . was greater during this era than in those immediately before or after it,”¹⁵ *Tis Pity* may be typically “Caroline” not because it depicts the disintegration of a world without paternal rule, but because it is laden with autocratic fathers. Against those readings of *Tis Pity* that posit a lawless, turbulent world where injustice and permissiveness run rampant, my argument here is thus that Parma suffers from an *overpresence* of law, that patriarchal law is implicated in nearly every interaction in the play.¹⁶

What is the relationship, then, between a world of overtly patriarchal rule and sibling incest? In Boehrer’s account, the incestuous individual “aspir[es] to absolute being.”¹⁷ But while such a claim accurately enough characterizes Giovanni, who is prone to gestures of possessive inwardness, it reveals little about Annabella, whose desire is less for dominance than

15. Ira Clark, *Professional Playwrights: Massinger, Ford, Shirley, and Brome* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1992), p. 20.

16. Nathaniel Strout, “The Tragedy of Annabella in *Tis Pity She’s a Whore*,” in *Traditions and Innovations: Essays on British Literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. David G. Allen and Robert White (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1990), pp. 163–76, suggests that Parma is “ruled” by “a sex, by fathers, brothers, uncles, and husbands,” and that “male authority dominates” the play (p. 169).

17. Boehrer, *Monarchy*, p. 146.

for a form of interconnection through sameness, a shared identification that does not obliterate the other. Boehrer's emphasis on incest as a denial of anything beyond the self reiterates a tendency in the critical history of *'Tis Pity* to focus almost exclusively on Giovanni, as if Annabella were merely the recipient of her brother's lust—a catalyst, perhaps, but not an agent of desire in her own right. It is *male* desire, after all, that founds both Freud's and Lévi-Strauss's narratives of the incest taboo, the son's desire for the mother that must be given over in favor of identification with patriarchal law and in order to send women into cultural circulation. Does Boehrer's Lacanian reading of early modern incest discourse thus collude with Lacan (as with Freud and Lévi-Strauss before him) in denying the woman a desire of her own? As McCabe observes, "it is by no means apparent why the Theban myth should reveal more about Oedipus than Jocasta, why the mother's desire for the son should be less interesting . . . than the son's desire for the mother."¹⁸ I would add that it is equally dubious that Giovanni's desire is more interesting, more threatening, or more politically revolutionary than Annabella's. The preponderance of treatments of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* elides Annabella as a source of interpretive interest, concentrating on what happens *to* Annabella while ignoring (or at the least minimizing) Annabella's own self-generated action and desire.¹⁹ But what happens if we shift our view toward the woman as the dangerous locus of desire in the play?

The fact that Annabella and Giovanni occupy unequal social positions, each carrying different expectations about the proper channeling of sexual desire, suggests that their motivations toward incest may also be different, and that their behavior will not necessarily lead to the same result. Indeed, it is the very difference in how they each respond to their desire that matters to the play's larger ideological argument. Annabella's involvement with a sibling stands as a more radical act of social protest than Gio-

18. McCabe, *Incest*, p. 6.

19. Making explicit the irrelevance of the "question of the woman," Mark Stavig wrote long ago that "the question of whether Annabella's repentance . . . is sincere is troublesome but is not crucial to the play's interpretation" (*John Ford and the Traditional Moral Order* [Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1968], p. 111). Ira Clark pacifies Annabella's disruptive force by claiming that "she obeys her brother" (p. 84). Rowland Wymer speaks of "Giovanni's challenge to society" but not of his sister's (p. 123), as does Dorothy Farr, who cites Giovanni but not Annabella as a "rebel and iconoclast" (p. 55). More recent feminist critics grant Annabella a share in the love between the siblings but tend nonetheless to situate the women of *'Tis Pity* in traditional roles of passive acquiescence to male dominance. Nathaniel Strout argues that Annabella "rejects the authority of conventional morality" only because she "substitut[es] for it the authority of her brother" (p. 171). And in her recent edition of four plays, Marion Lomax writes that women are "trapped" within gender stereotypes, unable to mount a resistance to the men that "manipulate" them (*John Ford: "'Tis Pity She's a Whore" and Other Plays*, ed. Marion Lomax [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995], p. xx). All quotations of Ford's *'Tis Pity* are from Lomax's edition.

vanni's, and has a more disturbing impact—not so much because, as a woman, she would have been expected to obey her father in the choice of a husband, but because it is through her that the play challenges its culture's normative discourses of gender and marriage. As I hope to show, Annabella's incestuous love for her brother symbolizes what Ford elsewhere called "parity of condition,"²⁰ a way of relating to self and other that protests both paternal authority and a patriarchal sexual economy in which women are exchanged between men. Annabella seeks through her sibling an experience of romantic and erotic equality that would be utterly unavailable to her through conventional marriage. In this sense her incest seems more openly transgressive than her brother's, as she struggles to avoid, if temporarily, the patriarchalism of the family to which marriage would consign her—to which, indeed, her eventual marriage to Soranzo does most violently confine her. Annabella's attempt to resist subordination to paternalistic control suggests a hope for a different sort of relationship, what Brian Opie describes as Ford's "model of a new psychic order,"²¹ one that is founded on reciprocity and mutual communication. A loving relationship based on Ford's principle of "parity" would repudiate the Law of the Father and declare that equality, personal integrity, and faithfulness to the other take precedence over "extrinsic rules ('law') and kinship networks"²² as the foundation of social stability. By pledging herself to her brother—seeking the kind of side-by-side equivalence that love for a sibling uniquely embodies—Annabella paradoxically refuses the familial structure whereby her desire and her subjectivity are guaranteed only within the bounds of a properly hierarchical marriage.

Far from manifesting a lack of male governance, *'Tis Pity's* multitude of "lesser" fathers signals a dispersal of paternal authoritarianism across the culture, an endless repetition of the patriarchal family-state analogue that Annabella's transgressive desire unsettles. From this perspective, the failure of Giovanni and Annabella's love is not that Giovanni rebels against a patriarchal ideology—straying so far from his own reason and self-control that Ford is "unable to let [him] live"²³—but that he so insistently *upholds* that ideology. Thus whereas Boehrer posits the absence of an absolute father-figure as *'Tis Pity's* fundamental political and philosophical dilemma, the notion of "parity" offers the possibility that the play *resists*, by virtue of its incestuous siblings, the very absolutism Boehrer contends that it tries to underwrite. Despite scholarly as well as textual assertions

20. Ford, dedication to *The Lover's Melancholy*, in Lomax edition, p. 3.

21. Brian Opie, "'Being All One': Ford's Analysis of Love and Friendship in *Loues Sacrifice* and *The Ladies Triall*," in Neill, ed., pp. 233–60, 257.

22. Opie, "'Being All One,'" p. 242.

23. Boehrer, *Monarchy*, p. 127.

of his rebelliousness, Giovanni remains fixed in conventional patriarchal attitudes. Annabella does not: her incestuous desire becomes a model for equality, openly opposing social and gender hierarchies. The play's daring insight, I believe, is that patriarchal law authorizes the very behavior it is deployed to forestall, and, most radically, that women, as autonomous and desiring beings, are the potential agents of social change.

Evidence of a firmly entrenched patriarchal order is introduced early on in the play. When Giovanni complains in the opening scene that he cannot put aside his desire for Annabella, the Friar advocates the assistance of prostitutes:

Look through the world,
And thou shalt see a thousand faces shine
More glorious than this idol thou ador'st.
Leave her, and take thy choice; 'tis much less sin. (I.i.59-62)

Several critics have acquitted Bonaventura of charges of ineptitude and immorality on the grounds of the "pragmatism"²⁴ of this solution; the Friar knows he is encouraging Giovanni toward fornication, but he intends thereby to save his young charge from the far worse "ruin" that incest guarantees (l. 67). It seems remarkable, nonetheless, that the Friar trades so easily in sin, substituting one form of illicit sexuality for another, and I would argue that such sanctioned transfer clearly underscores the sexual politics of the play. Bonaventura's language is revealing: counseling Giovanni to survey "the world" and "take" from that ample selection his "choice," he turns Giovanni into the imperialistic suitor who surveys women who are there for the taking (and notable only for their radiant beauty). The "practical" solution, then, sounds not very different from the dynamics of an already familiar gender hierarchy, and one that has full institutional backing. As Rowland Wymer points out, the Friar is "the principle representative of moral orthodoxy in the play" (as well as a member of the same church represented by the even more overtly corrupt Cardinal).²⁵

In a similar gesture that disguises a fundamental adherence to the regulation of female desire with apparent good intentions and paternal thoughtfulness, Annabella's father, Florio, imposes his own choice of husband on his daughter. At the start of the play, Florio indicates that Annabella will make her own marriage choice. "My care is how to match her to her liking," he tells Donado, "I would not have her marry wealth, but love" (I.iii.10-11). But such magnanimous display is as much a sign

24. Both Wymer (p. 124) and Derek Roper use this word (John Ford, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, ed. Derek Roper [Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1992], p. 12).

25. Wymer, *Webster*, p. 123-24.

of Florio's own status and economic power as it is a manifestation of any genuine interest in his daughter's autonomy—her happiness becomes one more possession he can show off. No sooner have events made a turn for the worse than he forces marriage to the nobleman Soranzo upon her. Moreover, his profession of Annabella's independence is called into question several times throughout the play. In the prior scene, for example, in which Soranzo duels with Grimaldi over Annabella's affection, Florio asks Soranzo, "Why [should you] storm, having my word engaged: / Owing her heart, what need you doubt her ear?" (I.ii.52–53). Still later he says explicitly to Annabella herself, "Soranzo is the man I only like" (II.vi.118). The issue of Annabella's marriage "match" has been settled, then, by the father; the later conversation on the subject with Donado is revealed to be not only a lie, but also a potential business negotiation, since marriage to Donado's nephew Bergetto would bring with it "Three thousand florins yearly" (I.iii.17). What sounded like the words of a "true father" (I.iii.14)—"My care is how to match her to her liking"—now suggests Florio's concern to enforce Annabella's acquiescence to *his* choice, his language nearly implying that he could influence not only her compliance ("match her") but her desires (her "liking") as well.

The Cardinal stands as an especially pointed example of the way in which apparent deviations from patriarchal law obscure a much more profound implication in it. The Cardinal's behavior is often cited as the most egregious evidence of Parma's spiritual and judicial infirmity: he harbors the murderer Grimaldi, sanctions the murder of Hippolita, and confiscates for the Church "all the gold and jewels" of the dead (V.vi.145). Derek Roper makes the conventional view explicit, commenting that when the Cardinal grants protection to Grimaldi after the latter's (inadvertent) stabbing of Bergetto, "the moral authority of the Church disappears."²⁶ Yet from a different perspective the Cardinal might be seen as the most fully authorized character in the play, one whose institutional status and discursive control exemplifies, rather than lacks, male power. This point has been forcefully made by Susan Wiseman, who writes that the Cardinal is "a powerful manipulator of the language of the city."²⁷ Despite the outraged reaction of Florio and Donado to the Cardinal's brusque dismissal of them after the death of Donado's nephew ("Is this a churchman's voice? Dwells Justice here?" [III.ix.61]), it is nevertheless the case that the Cardinal's discursive power easily subdues the angry crowd:

26. Roper, ed., *Tis*, p. 12.

27. Susan Wiseman, "Tis Pity She's a Whore: Representing the Incestuous Body," in *Renaissance Bodies: The Human Figure in English Culture, c. 1540–1660*, ed. Lucy Gent and Nigel Llewellyn (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), pp. 180–97, quotation at p. 192.

What saucy mates are you
That know nor duty nor civility?
...
... is our house become your common inn
To beat our doors at pleasure? (III.ix.28–32)

"[L]earn more wit, for shame," he chides them, as if they are unruly children (l. 59). As Wiseman shows, the Cardinal's language has transformative power. At the end of the play, for instance, he is able to rewrite the meaning of Annabella's desire so that it fits into recognizable patriarchal narratives about female sexuality. Describing the last scene, Wiseman writes,

The Cardinal's address transforms the incest once again into something containable within the single realm of culture when in the closing words of the play he pronounces, "'tis pity she's a whore."

The phrase reconstitutes the dominant position of family, state and the church within society. Simultaneously, however, it calls attention to the failure of the secular and sacred languages used in the play to contain or reinterpret incest.

... In the Cardinal's closing line of the play (also the title) the waters of language return to cover incest and to substitute a crime which allows the meanings of femininity to remain stable. Annabella is returned from incest to the dangerous (but less dangerous) general category for the desirous female. As a "whore" Annabella once again signifies within the problematic of endless female desire.²⁸

This suggests that men's behavior, even in its seemingly most unpardonable forms, is always informed by an underlying structure of patriarchal law and language whereby that behavior *makes sense*. Female desire is not similarly informed, and must be reconstituted within established discourse. The Cardinal's manipulation of power and his refusal to demonstrate compassion or goodwill may shock, but nowhere is that position refuted. Even Grimaldi seems to assume that language can save him, explaining his "unluckily" (l. 46) foiled "ambush" (l. 45) of Soranzo with all the calm rationality of a man discussing a business deal gone awry.

To these moments could be added, I think, the behavior of most of the play's male characters, who (with the possible exception of the foolish Bergetto) are able to marshal the forces of discourse to their service. As Hippolita says of her former lover Soranzo, men have "supple words to smooth the grossness" (II.ii.46) of their actions; against male rationality, women are "too violent" (l. 51), "past all rules of sense" (l. 60), "not near the limits of reason" (l. 61). This last phrase, spoken by Soranzo's servant Vasques, is particularly significant in that it demonstrates the formidable

28. Wiseman, "'Tis," pp. 194–95.

strength of male bondedness in the play: the servant can rebuke the noblewoman because his alliance with a nobleman allows him to transgress class distinction. The effect of this is reinforced further on, when Vasques, already plotting against her, tells Hippolita that she must “master a little [her] female spleen” to gain any foothold with his master Soranzo (l. 123). Entering into discourse with a man requires that women overcome the irrationality of their bodies; the servant’s gender allegiance grants him a position from which he can “advise” his class superior. The fact that Vasques goes on to subvert Hippolita’s scheme against Soranzo, rejecting her offer (reiterated no less than three times in a short dialogue) to make him “lord” (l. 148) and “master” (l. 130) not only of her wealth and estate but also of her “self,” suggests that the bonds of male alliance take precedence over the seductions of greed or the potentially pleasurable power of domination over a woman. Vasques constructs his own way to “master” the Amazonian Hippolita by fouling her plot against Soranzo. What is more, the fundamental paternalism of his position is made quite explicit at the end of the play, when he tells the Cardinal that he was a servant of Soranzo’s father and has “served faithfully” the son out of debt to the father (V.vi.116–17). Devotion to paternal control supersedes all other considerations, particularly when the woman in question is one whose sexuality has been made to seem the source of malice and vile pride.

There is nothing truly inexplicable about the world of *'Tis Pity*, for all its exaggerated displays of opportunism and revenge. It is a world defined by types, by representatives of the law and church, of commerce and contract, of nobility and codes of honor. If it is possible to come “all undone, quite undone, utterly undone” in Parma (III.iii.1; see also I.ii.205), the city also demands that one “must obey” the “wills” of “Great men” (III.ix.67)—a commitment to patriarchal ideology that wraps up discord in a reassertion of hierarchy. Most significant to this discussion is Giovanni, who, even and perhaps especially in incest, acts out and upon a familiarly empowered masculinism, demanding the satisfaction of his sexual desire through possession of the woman. To that end he too rallies forth the service of a range of discourses that voice and guarantee his male subjectivity, despite his ostentatious protest early on that the conventions and language of culture cannot obstruct his will:

Shall a peevish sound,
A customary form, from man to man,
Of brother and of sister, be a bar
'Twixt my perpetual happiness and me? (I.i.24–27)

His initial dialogue with Bonaventura is a study in philosophical disputation, while Marlovian flourish underlies his speeches of tortured anguish and heroic self-justification. In his wooing of Annabella, Giovanni turns

to courtly lyricism ("The lily and the rose, most sweetly strange, / Upon your dimpled cheeks do strive for change" [I.ii.190–91]) and to Neoplatonic reasoning ("Wise Nature . . . meant / To make you mine; else 't had been sin and foul / To share one beauty to a double soul" [ll. 226–28]). Scholars have long pointed to *Romeo and Juliet* as the most immediate forebear of *'Tis Pity*, yet Giovanni's interactions with Annabella lack the true reciprocity of language or feeling that Shakespeare's lovers display.²⁹ Unlike Romeo, Giovanni is prone to jealousy, to a language of suspicion, to violent possessiveness. A far more immediate analogue to Giovanni, in fact, is the play's own Soranzo. Both make use of conventional courtly poetry to figure their feelings toward Annabella; both succumb to jealous accusation and ultimately violence to eradicate the insult of Annabella's sexual body (an accusation that Soranzo, at least, has visible proof of). The fictionality of Petrarchan idealization is quickly exposed, revealing the dominance hidden beneath.

There is nothing really incoherent about the world of *'Tis Pity*, I've suggested—except a woman who attempts to articulate and satisfy her own desire by turning away from that world. Unlike her brother, Annabella does not ask any patriarchal representative for "permission." Our first indication that she has erotic feelings for Giovanni comes as a surprise (to Giovanni, as well), during their first exchange in the play's second scene: "I blush to tell thee—but I'll tell thee now" (I.ii.237). She simply breaks the taboo, and in so doing refuses the identity that her culture would arrange for her. That her own desire is essentially irrelevant to the male figures who surround her is demonstrated in the matter of Bergetto as a potential husband. Annabella speaks her mind—"I'm sure I sha' not be his wife" (II.vi.52)—and the uncle Donado "commend[s]" her for it, citing her "plain dealing" (I. 53). Thus it seems that Annabella is able to dictate her own wishes and to determine her future. Yet in this situation the father-figures have little to lose from Annabella's refusal; Bergetto's

29. For a brilliant discussion of linguistic and psychical echoing between the lovers, see Edward Snow, "Language and Sexual Difference in *Romeo and Juliet*," in *Shakespeare's "Rough Magic": Renaissance Essays in Honor of C. L. Barber*, ed. Peter Erickson and Coppelia Kahn (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1985), pp. 168–92. Raymond Powell discusses the influence of *Othello* on Ford in "The Adaptation of a Shakespearean Genre: *Othello* and Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 48 (1995), 582–92. Powell's demonstration of the similarities between Annabella and Desdemona illuminates the former's attempt to control her own sexuality. "In his portrayal of Annabella," writes Powell, "Ford seems to have taken over from *Othello* the heroine's rejection of the social conventions and expectations that bear upon an unmarried, attractive, well-born young woman"; like Desdemona, Annabella is "prompted by her own judgment and feelings" toward "an act of social defiance based on love" (p. 588). One might remember, too, Desdemona's frank complaint that Othello's departure for the war in Cyprus will leave her "bereft" of "The rites for which I love him" (I.iii.257). William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. M. R. Ripley (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

foolishness is undisputed, even by his uncle, and Florio and Donado claim they “will still be friends” (l. 55). That a father should influence his daughter’s choice of marriage partner would hardly be surprising to Ford’s seventeenth-century audience. Yet Florio’s conspicuous maneuvering is set against Annabella’s assumption that she has a legitimate claim to voicing her desire, giving the lie to her father’s benevolent pretensions.³⁰ A woman’s self-expression can be acknowledged, but only briefly and only because, ultimately, it does not disrupt the male economy.

Moreover, what would be truly “equal” to Annabella—i.e., Giovanni—is denied her, and so she must wrest it by force, through what Wiseman calls an “act of will.”³¹ In this sense Annabella is making the voyage that Julia Kristeva describes as abjection, a search for what has been thrown off in the subject’s entry into the symbolic order, that which cannot be spoken or known in the Name and the No of the father—her own female desire, an erotic desire that is also always a desire for equality. That Annabella’s desire specifically cannot be spoken—as opposed to incestuous sex in general or the imputed “whorishness” of a woman’s sexuality—is implied in different ways by both siblings. Annabella herself says first to Giovanni, “I durst not say I loved; nor scarcely think it” (I.ii.241); and later to Putana, “I would not have it known for all the world” (II.i.46). On the other hand, and despite asserting that incest “shall go unnamed” (II.v.58), Giovanni speaks openly and defiantly about it—from his dispute with the Friar in the first scene (“Shall . . . / My joys be ever banished from her bed?” [I.i.36–37]) to his bloody tableau in the last (“For nine months’ space, in secret I enjoyed / Sweet Annabella’s sheets” [V.vi.43–44]). If Kristeva’s paradigm understands incest to entail retrieval of both the body of the mother and the infant’s presymbolic union with her—and thus a radical “[c]orruption” of patriarchal culture³²—Ford’s play also observes that incest interrogates the narratives that constitute the threshold between the abject and the domain of “culture.” The eruption of named, gratified, incestuous female desire in the context of seventeenth-century debates about fatherly rule, class unity, and the divine right of kings throws into question the essential or stable boundaries of the patriarchal unit.

Through her desire for Giovanni, Annabella suggests that a certain kind

30. As Strout observes, “marriageable daughters were expected to follow the lead of men, especially their fathers and the husbands those fathers approved of” (“Tragedy,” pp. 163–64). For a discussion of Florio’s “schemes to marry his family into the upper class” (p. 430) and a reading of *Tis Pity* that interprets incest as “an elitist desire to fend off claims of equivalency made by City families,” see Terri Clerico, “The Politics of Blood: John Ford’s *Tis Pity She’s a Whore*,” *ELR*, 22 (1992), 405–34, quotation at 423.

31. Wiseman, “*Tis*,” p. 188.

32. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982), p. 16.

Giovanni's fundamental implication in a patriarchal world that his sister far more boldly attempts to reject.

Giovanni presumes to find his way back to the mother's womb through Annabella's body. It is a bloody journey, culminating in Annabella's heart impaled on Giovanni's phallic dagger. For Kristeva such a journey leads through and to the abject, that which refuses to maintain the clean and orderly separation of self and other, inner and outer. If it can be said that Annabella represents an "abjectifying" rather than an "objectified" female sexuality, she would seem to offer to Giovanni, through that radical subject position, a way of unsettling an identity made rigid by patriarchal discourse. By entering into a specifically incestuous affair, Giovanni satisfies a web of conflicting desires. Through the association of Annabella and their mother, he reclaims connection to the gratifying maternal body; through a kind of amassing of identity made possible by Annabella's "sameness," he can assuage the anxiety of a masculinity only tenuously constituted by a discourse of female difference.³⁴ He regards Annabella as the female Other who brings him into being, able to grant him—or to withhold from him—a sense of his own subjectivity: "'tis my destiny / That you must either love, or I must die," Giovanni tells her (I.ii.218–19), and later asks, "Must I now live, or die?" (I. 234). Moreover, through this sexual alliance with a woman who is also his sister, Giovanni can perform the role of "renegade"³⁵ to culture, flouting the behavioral dictates set for him, as a young scholar and son of a prominent Parmesan merchant, by patriarchal law.

Yet Giovanni's desire for Annabella seems, finally, only slightly less than conventional, or perhaps emphatically conventional in its very unlawfulness. By sleeping with his sister, Giovanni can play at "naughty" behavior; but no sooner has their first sexual encounter transpired than he reverts to conventionalized male attitudes, assuming that Annabella will carry out her patriarchally determined role as wife even as he deems himself her monarch. When they enter "as from their chamber" (II.i, stage direction) at the start of the second act, his "Come Annabella, no more sister now" (II.i.1) implies her transformation from sibling to lover—from, in effect, one kind of equality to another. But the more insidious undertone of Gio-

34. On the notion of "anxious masculinity," see Mark Breitenberg's compelling book *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996). Breitenberg writes, for example, that "men scurry about trying to contain a threat to their authority that they have themselves constructed in the first place" (p. 22). The idea that a fluid Galenic body also made the pressure of rhetoric especially intense in questions of gender is well documented by Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990), and Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500–1800* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1995).

35. The word is Madelon Sprengnether's (*The Spectral Mother: Freud, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990], p. 220).

vanni's renaming suggests that Annabella is "no more sister" because she is now to be considered his subject; in stock Petrarchan terms, Annabella has "conquered" only because she first "yield[ed]" (4). The effect of this is to make Annabella's participation in their union a capitulation to Giovanni's priority, and thus to deny her the power of her own attraction. And despite the seemingly genuine intimacy of their exchange, Giovanni goes on to become still more insistent in his articulation of the hierarchy of their relation—"I envy not the mightiest man alive," he swaggers, "But hold myself in being king of thee / More great than were I king of all the world" (II.i.18–20). Barely submerged in the surface compliment to Annabella, Giovanni's assertion of power seems to derive directly from the consummation of their desire. He fashions himself the master and monarch of her sexuality, transforming Annabella from the sister who might represent "parity"—made manifest by their shared bodies—to a stabilized, objectified globe over which he might preside. Far from establishing any sort of equity, incest conducts Giovanni to an overt expression of the kind of mastery that the Friar had earlier proposed as a "solution" to that same incestuous energy—he is the imperialist "regent" (III.ii.18), the "happy monarch" who rules Annabella's "heart" and self (V.vi.45).

At the same time, however, Giovanni reveals the fragility of his own transgressiveness, how subject his desire is to culture's delimiting expectations. No sooner has he declared himself Annabella's ruler than he imagines her married—literally exchanged from one patriarchal representative to another. He had claimed she was "no longer sister." Now he tells her, "You must be married, mistress," his epithet conflating her prior liaison with him and her future position as wife, as if Giovanni would himself pass her on to this imagined, but also assumed, future husband: "Someone must have you" (II.i.22–23). Giovanni's language measures the extent to which even his trespass with his sister has not altered a fundamentally conservative conception of social relationships or of gender roles. Annabella's is still a transferable, possessable female body, and Giovanni's desire for her seems, if anything, to be heightened by the further titillation of adultery added to incest. (Despite his loud protestations against adultery elsewhere, Giovanni can indulge an overdetermined fantasy here precisely because he figures himself as Annabella's lover/father-figure who sends her into circulation.) If the incest taboo seeks through demarcation of the boundaries of the family to establish and perpetuate societal transaction, then in obeying both his incestuous desire and the expectation of marriage, Giovanni suggests the profoundly tangled interrelation of the two: to the degree that all husbands in a patriarchal culture are father figures, no marriage resides completely beyond the limit of incest. And since any man may be said to participate in the patriarchal ideology that undergirds a

paternalistic structure of marriage, even sibling incest may be laden with the hierarchical power dynamics of traditional marital relationships. Soranzo makes this clear when he says to Annabella, “will not I forget what I should be, / And what I am, a husband; in that name / Is hid divinity” [IV.iii.134–36]. A husband is a monarch is a god: a pithy encapsulation of Caroline absolutism.

Giovanni’s pun on “have” and Annabella’s rejoinder further one’s sense that it is Annabella who voices the more radical desire, Annabella who means to control her own sexuality. When he follows “You must be married, mistress” with “Someone must have you” (II.i.22–23), he conflates his expectation about Annabella’s socialized identity with his new awareness of, and interest in, her sexuality; he also suggests how deeply related the two really are. As a sexualized woman, Annabella must be married; as an adult woman headed toward marriage, Annabella must be sexually available to an unnamed, unknown, but assumed “Someone.” Yet when Annabella herself responds with a confident (and playful) “You must” (I.23), she reminds Giovanni, as well as the audience, just how fully trained *on him* is her desire. In swearing herself to Giovanni alone, she removes herself from circulation in, and subjectivity within, an economy of marriage predicated not only on the incest taboo but on the inequities of patriarchal rule as well. She embraces, in short, her own abjectness, “dar[ing]” (II.i.28) through the kind of equality that sibling incest represents to imagine a world in which such relationships—by which I mean not incestuous unions, but ones whose mutuality defies the laws of kinship—could be sustained.

This possibility that Annabella is more openly incestuous and therefore more fully transgressive is borne out by a verbal detail often cited as evidence of Giovanni’s narcissism. Just after the siblings have revealed their desire, they pledge themselves to one another. “[E]ven by our mother’s dust,” Annabella tells her brother, “I charge you / . . . / Love me, or kill me”; and he replies, “even by my mother’s dust I charge you, / . . . / Love me, or kill me” (I.ii.244–49). That Annabella correctly says “our mother,” while Giovanni possessively claims “my mother,” raises the question of whether Giovanni is able to perceive Annabella as a truly separate person, or merely as an extension of himself. Several critics have contended on the basis of these inconsistent pronouns that Giovanni’s desire is purely narcissistic, that “my mother” denotes both his appropriative negation of Annabella’s identity as well as his inability to “share” their absent mother with his sister. But it is also possible that Giovanni’s pronoun, insofar as it denies Annabella’s equal claim to their common origin, in fact overtly imposes onto her an altogether *different* origin. By pledging his love only by *his* mother, in other words, Giovanni suggests that Annabella has some

other mother. He thereby avoids full recognition of the very relatedness he elsewhere seems to insist upon, and he denies the possibility of a "parity" in love. The ramification of this, I think, is to make their sexual union less threatening, to retrieve it from the dangerous domain of incest to a safer discourse of illicit fornication (and thus to participate in just the kind of discursive confinement of female desire demonstrated by the Cardinal in the final scene). Annabella, in contrast, insists upon their filial connection, pledges first in their exchange of vows, and unabashedly expresses a lawless eroticism. She, then, becomes the more potent critic of the kinds of hierarchized relationships and conventionally gendered discourse that pervade *'Tis Pity*.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, to hear Annabella so candidly tell Florio that Giovanni wears the ring "bequeathed" to her by their mother, a ring she was "charged" not to bestow upon "any but [her] husband" (II.vi.36–38). Given that history, Florio's startled query about the ring's disappearance—"Ha! Have it not? Where is 't?" (l. 39)—seems to make its sexual meaning obvious, and to suggest that on some level he interprets its absence correctly: Annabella no longer has the ring because she is no longer a virgin. That she would venture so close to a public avowal of her "married" condition, and that she openly implicates Giovanni in her transition from maiden to "wife," heightens the impression of Annabella's voice as one of subversive resistance.

I have been arguing that incest offers both siblings a new way of imagining themselves as individuals, and that their intimacy represents a challenge to contemporary discourses of sexuality and subjectivity. It makes sense, then, that a related preoccupation in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* is the notion of loss. The word—conveying both the act of losing and the more psychical state of being lost—recurs throughout the play, working to suggest that the kinds of normative social definitions of identity available in Parma are inadequate, resulting in a pervasive sense of alienation and confusion. I would argue that the prevailing feeling of being "lost" and "undone" might signal, in the manner of Annabella and Giovanni's incestuous sexual relationship, the play's challenge to social bonds based on gender hierarchies and restrictive institutional discourses. Characters repeatedly announce their "lostness" when the languages of law, religion, literary convention, honor, philosophy, and so on—all subject to "masculine control"³⁶—fail to name or explain their feelings or behavior.

The Friar is the first to exclaim, to Giovanni, "thou art lost!" (I.i.35). In addition, the "fruits" of Bonaventura's "hopes" are "lost" in and because

36. Wiseman, "*Tis*," p. 190.

of Giovanni's actions (ll. 55–56). He says of the incestuous siblings, "A pair of souls are lost" (II.v.69), and when he counsels Giovanni to look to other women, he rather weakly pronounces the apothegm that "in such games as those they lose that win" (I.i.63). Quickly, through the figure of the Friar, "lostness" comes to signify revolt against a culturally sanctioned order; to defy patriarchal law is to be beyond legibility, to be "unlocatable," stripped of identity, lost. Soranzo reiterates this idea when he tells Vasques, "now I doubly am undone, / In both my present and my future hopes" (III.ii.71–72), since Annabella's refusal of him is quickly followed by the first signs of "sickness" (i.e., her pregnancy). The "loss" of Annabella as a potential wife frustrates Soranzo's plans to marry well. Perhaps less consciously and more fundamentally, Annabella is the beautiful, virtuous, courtly Lady who establishes his identity as a worthy male within their cultural framework. Without her to guarantee that status (and with Hippolita ever at the margins to reveal the brutal underside that opposes and sustains Soranzo's noble exterior), he is "undone." Hippolita's own reference to her "loss of womanhood" (II.ii.40) makes the point from a different perspective, suggesting that "womanhood" is equivalent to being a pure and "lawful" (I. 38) wife—chaste within marriage, obedient to the husband regardless of affection—and that the loss of a good reputation as such a wife marks an ideological loss of her very being as a "woman." Importantly, it is her own sexual desire that conducts Hippolita across that threshold.

References to being lost, found, and undone thus suggest a complex interplay between desire and law, calling attention to the way in which desire is both a pathway toward being and a rebellion against the law that provides the "name," the identity. When Giovanni laments, "Lost, I am lost" (I.ii.134), when he says that he is "untuned" (I. 207) and "quite undone" (I. 205), he suggests that the experience of an insatiable desire (because he can neither renounce nor consummate it as yet) causes a disorganizing of identity; he loses himself in and to the force of his desire, which threatens to divest him of assured selfhood and render him no longer "identical" to himself. His incestuous longing also renders him "lost" to the patriarchal world of exogamous marriage and the proper circulation of women, a "lost" access to and success in the discursive structures that govern the correct discharge of a man's passion. There is also the more submerged maternal loss that touches the periphery of the play, implied through the incest plot. Each of these forms of loss Giovanni would asuage—paradoxically, because the cure is also the cause—through connection to his sister, through a kind of exaggerated sexual intimacy that is at once a form of union with the lost mother and an attempt to relocate the self. Annabella's reciprocation of his desire allows him to "live."

It is curious, then, that Giovanni announces that he cannot forgo his feel-

ings for Annabella by claiming, "I'm still the same" (I.ii.147). He makes the same assertion about Annabella, remarking of her virginity, "So strange a loss, when being lost, 'tis nothing, / And you are still the same" (II.i.11–12). It is significant that only Giovanni makes the latter claim for himself (he is the only character in the play to announce being "the same"), that he asserts his own ontological continuity even as he seems to deny the import of Annabella's newly realized sexuality (their lovemaking hasn't changed her, she is "the same"). If identity depends on a state of self- "sameness," then Annabella must be both "different" from him (as his linguistic efforts have tried to insist) yet constant to herself. If sexual fulfillment were to change her—if she were to become threateningly uncontainable, "undone"—the monarchical Giovanni might risk the loss of an identity already fragile for being based on the creation and the suppression of otherness. Whereas Giovanni would erase Annabella's change, stabilizing her in sameness as a way of neutralizing the dangerous potential of her incestuous desire and sexuality, it is in fact Giovanni himself who remains the same. What looks like paradoxical self-appraisal, therefore ("I am lost," "I'm still the same"), reveals Giovanni's essential rootedness within phallic law. Looking to Annabella to return him to himself, he merely reinscribes her as abject other whose function is to ensure his own subjectivity. Seeming to jeer at convention, Giovanni really *is* "the same," precisely because he isn't trying to change at all: incest is not so much a revolutionary act for Giovanni as it is a demonstration of the very power, granted to him as a young man of wealth and position, against which he would seem to protest.

Annabella's own declaration, "I am lost" (V.i.11), is more complicated, because her desire is exerted from a position not of cultural privilege but of marginality. Only when her pregnancy has been discovered—and the inescapable visibility of her female body prevents her from hiding her affair with Giovanni within the disguise of her conventional marriage to Soranzo—does she represent herself as lost, and she is so then only because her condition signals her detachment from that normative paradigm and thus foregrounds the probability of punishment. Annabella's crisis of "conscience" (V.i.9), I would argue, is a matter of efficacy; her use of "lost" signals "done for" as much as it does Giovanni's more ontological displacement or the abandonment of divine favor. It is significant that the scene of Annabella's repentance occurs immediately after her fierce confrontation with Soranzo, suggesting that she construes her "lostness" in the specific terms of public discovery of pregnancy, the sign not of her lost virginity but of her active sexuality—as if to emphasize that her affair with Giovanni signifies less an irrevocable forfeiture than a gaining of both physical satisfaction and the maturity of a self-directed sexuality. The fact that mutual orgasm was considered a necessary component of conception

in the seventeenth century would only exacerbate the outrage her pregnancy might induce in Soranzo. It also adds to the political force of Annabella's situation—we not only infer but also *see* that she has experienced sexual pleasure. It is Giovanni who reads their first encounter as a loss of maidenhead, and then tries to elide the frightening reality of her as a sexualized adult by imposing “sameness” on her experience. Thus Giovanni's remark—“you are still the same”—is both true and untrue; Annabella might look the same externally, but the meaning of her body (particularly if her sexual activity becomes known³⁷) has changed dramatically. The fact that Giovanni effectively denies the loss of her status as a marriageable maiden in Parma by making her the “same” after their first sexual union stands as further evidence, I think, that his expressions of transgressive rebelliousness are, finally, poses. A truly revolutionary Annabella—a fully sexualized, incestuous, *alive* Annabella—is more than he can account for in the patriarchal terms of his narrative of selfhood. He announces them as incestuous lovers only after he has murdered her (along with the child she carries) and mutilated the body that was the sign of both her independence and difference from him.

One of the ways in which *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* establishes the incest between Annabella and Giovanni as not only a reasonable or viable form of intimacy but even a very model of sympathetic understanding is to contrast their relationship with those of the other characters in the play. Conventional marriage, in particular, is shown to be undermined by the machinations of greed, hypocrisy, and ruptured trust. Indeed, *'Tis Pity* contains no marriages based on love and respect, on “parity of condition.” The play's moral “authorities,” of course, are celibate, as Philotis is soon to be.³⁸ Annabella and Giovanni's mother is dead, so Florio sets no current example of successful marriage. Hippolita's marriage to Richardetto was obviously an unsatisfying one, leading her to adultery with Soranzo, and she

37. Of course, Annabella's troublingly sexual body is fully visible—to Richardetto, disguised as a physician, and to her father Florio; the marriage to Soranzo must be finalized speedily to accommodate the “fullness of her blood” (III.iv.7).

38. Mark Shell's study of monachism in *Measure for Measure* (*The End of Kinship: “Measure for Measure,” Incest, and the Ideal of Universal Siblinghood* [Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1988]) suggestively argues that the doctrine of Universal Siblinghood makes all people spiritual kin and thus any relationship effectively incestuous. Moreover, even within the convent to which Philotis flees to avoid the horrors of sexual expression in Parma, “all men are certainly her spiritual kin” (p. 175), as Shell writes of Isabella. “[F]rom a Christian spiritual perspective,” Shell continues, incest is “an essential requirement of the Holy Family as of Universal Siblinghood generally, and, from a Christian physical perspective, the antonomasia for and telos of all sexual activity, including that in wedlock” (p. 178). Did Ford know that Richardetto's protective maneuver on behalf of his niece would merely resituate her within an inescapably incestuous milieu?

is more than once betrayed by men—the pledges Soranzo made to her are swiftly recast as unlawful and degrading when he finds it convenient to reject her, and she dies poisoned by Vasques. Soranzo's marriage to Annabella is grounded in violent self-interest. In a field of devious and doltish suitors, the siblings seem to be each other's only acceptable partners, and it is through these subplots of malicious, coercive relationships that the play critiques marriage for its propensity toward aggression and self-indulgence. The culture's inability to arrive at a form of marriage based on compatibility or equality may be what organizes the play around loss, and therefore desire. In this sense, incest (precisely because it is destined to shock) sets in relief the psychological affinity and solidarity that Annabella and Giovanni discover, at least initially, in each other.

A second strategy is to characterize the social environment of Parma as a slippery text of rumor and innuendo, suspicion and false accusation. The characters worry repeatedly about their reputations and their inability to prevent false rumor from proliferating, and so about what can and cannot be reliably known about them. As Opie remarks, "Society . . . is perceived as profoundly dangerous for the individual. . . . The power invested in language, whether for creation (naming) or destruction (scandal) of an individual is enormous."³⁹ Hippolita and Soranzo's adultery, for example, is widely known in Parma—Putana jokes that Soranzo's reputation as a lover makes him a good catch for Annabella (I.ii.82–94), and Hippolita herself admits to knowing the affair is not a secret:

'Tis now no time to reckon up the talk
What Parma long hath rumoured of us both.
Let rash report run on; the breath that vents it
Will, like a bubble, break itself at last. (IV.i.42–45)

Putana makes the crude but keen point that Annabella's sexual relationship with her brother would be "nothing" were it not for "the speech of the people" (II.i.47–48); when the marriage to Soranzo sours, "Much talk" (IV.ii.13) quickly spreads the word. Annabella herself is already the stuff of narrative, mythologized by Giovanni and Soranzo alike through the discourse of love poetry, then renamed "whore" by the play's perhaps most corrupt and certainly most influential character when she can no longer speak for herself. Others' words, impossible to control, make recognition—knowing another's desire and having one's own desire known—tenuous. Even Annabella has trouble "recognizing" Giovanni at the start of the play ("what blessèd shape / Of some celestial creature now appears? / What man is he?" [I.ii.121–23]). In such a world, language falsely assesses as well as creates meaning, making it difficult to establish a sense

39. Opie, "'Being All One,'" p. 254.

of identity. Incest becomes a metaphor for collapsing the gap, defying the unreliability (but also the power) of signification. Giovanni only looks like “himself” again when he voices his love to his sister, and in the subsequent repetitions of language that perform and prove their interconnection.

But what does it mean, finally, to say that Annabella is “more” incestuous or more radically transgressive than Giovanni, when by the end of the play she has been cowed by the Friar’s tale of hellfire and damnation, abused by Soranzo, and murdered by her brother? The play’s two vicious banquet scenes, in which Hippolita is poisoned, Putana blinded and ordered to be burned, Annabella’s heart brandished at the end of Giovanni’s knife, and Giovanni himself killed by the servant Vasques, encapsulate what seems writ large in Parma: that civilized society is not civilized enough, that a lack of an ideological establishment leads to uncontrollable upheaval. Yet Annabella’s behavior in the play, her apparent recapitulation to patriarchal rules, no less than her adamant determination to express her sexuality in boundary-breaking ways, suggests not that the world of the play lacks structure, but that it has too much structure. Authoritarian inflexibility—what Kristeva calls “*Too much strictness on the part of the Other*”⁴⁰—can only be responded to by a violent turning inward, away from the phallic law of marriage and exchange. That Annabella turns to a brother who is himself so fully inscribed in that law, or that she herself ultimately capitulates to its overbearing and manipulative discourses of shame, do not, in my view, diminish the disruptive force of her effort to manifest sexual or linguistic independence. If anything, the failure of Annabella’s efforts reveal just how oppressive patriarchal law can be. Hobbes writes in *Leviathan* that “to have no Desire, is to be Dead.”⁴¹ While Annabella’s brutal death at the hands of her lover-brother might seem to prove that desire is no protection against death or the pressure on a woman to subordinate herself to the powers of a male-dominated culture, Annabella nevertheless also invites us to imagine the possibility of a world in which female desire is fully legitimate.

Indeed, for all its apparent anxiety about the failure of localized patriarchal authority, this may be *Tis Pity*’s most provocative intuition: that fatherly law has dispersed across the culture, and that it is the cause (not the cure) of incest—which can in turn be rewritten to symbolize the potential for a different kind of intimacy. Monarchical absolutism does not deny power to individual men, Ford shows. If the fiction of masculine

40. Kristeva, *Powers*, p. 15.

41. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. and introd. by C. B. Macpherson (London and New York: Penguin, 1968), p. 139. Giovanni has often been read according to Hobbes’s further claim, that “to have stronger, and more vehement Passions for any thing, than is ordinarily seen in others, is that which men call madness.”

superiority depends on the collaboration of women,⁴² so too does a politics of absolute power depend for its survival on the tacit participation of its male subjects. At the same time, male law endorses its own disobedience. Giovanni's actions make sense in a patriarchal world of social banter, male solidarity, and business exchange, but the only way in which Parma can read Annabella's desire is through the discourse of whorishness; her transgression cannot be withstood or fully contained except through false naming. By exposing both the capaciousness and the inflexibility of male power, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* "indict[s]"⁴³ its culture as deeply and problematically patriarchal, while Annabella deconstructs that culture from within.

42. As Virginia Woolf asserted long ago, "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (*A Room of One's Own* [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1981], p. 35).

43. The word is Harriet Hawkins' ("Mortality," p. 131).