Irregular Unions

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Conclusion
Incestuous Clandestine Marriage in John Ford’s ’Tis Pity She’s a Whore

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, fictions of clandestine marriage allowed early modern authors to engage with the social, religious, and political discourses on the practice and with each other. The pervasive nature of these fictions confirms that clandestine marriage was a defining issue of the late Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. Up to this point, I have focused on uncovering fictions of clandestine marriage that are not immediately obvious to a modern reader or have not garnered sustained critical consideration as such. One popular fiction of clandestine marriage from the Elizabethan era, however, demands more of our attention: Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Required reading for almost every high school student in the United States, *Romeo and Juliet* has become one of the most celebrated love stories of all time. The tragedy’s countless theatrical and film adaptations attest to its enduring popularity. *Romeo and Juliet* also captivated early modern audiences and authors, who appropriated its story, language, and lessons just as modern filmmakers do today.¹ In this conclusion, I explore *Romeo and Juliet*’s legacy in John Ford’s ’Tis Pity She’s a Whore. In doing so, I suggest that we do not need to see Ford’s revision of Shakespeare’s play as being “derivative” but rather as revealing how the practice of clandestine marriage continued to play a central role in early modern culture and literature into the Caroline period.²

Scholars have long recognized *Romeo and Juliet* as providing a backdrop for Ford’s play.³ Both plays focus on the meteoric rise and precipitous fall of
forbidden love. In addition to the young lovers, Ford retains the characters of Shakespeare’s friar, the comic nurse, and the matchmaking patriarch; the very language of these characters often echoes that of their Shakespearean counterparts. Clearly, Ford expected to conjure Shakespeare’s popular play in the minds of his audience members as they watched his tragedy of incest unfold. But to what end? Bruce Thomas Boehrer links the theme of incest in ‘Tis Pity to a royalist agenda, arguing that the play “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.”

According to this argument, Ford’s portrayal of incest suggests the degradation of moral values in the absence of monarchy. Emily C. Bartels observes that the theme of incest constitutes the most crucial plot difference between the two plays. While Shakespeare’s lovers “marry before they satisfy their desires,” she observes, “marriage is absolutely out of the question” for Annabella and Giovanni. I will demonstrate, however, that Ford’s appropriation of the clandestine marriage plotline is what forces us to take Annabella and Giovanni’s incestuous relationship seriously. In particular, I argue that Ford associates his play not with a royalist agenda, as Boehrer suggests, but with a political agenda that condemns the role of Catholicism in the Caroline court. In this way, ‘Tis Pity is just as much about the controversy surrounding clandestine marriage in the latter stages of the English Renaissance as it is about the controversy surrounding incest.

By the 1620s, when ‘Tis Pity was written, the growing strain between Puritanism and Arminianism contributed to escalating debates about marriage. More radical members of Parliament had always expressed dissatisfaction with the precepts of the Elizabethan Religious Settlement, particularly with the ceremonial aspects of the Book of Common Prayer’s marriage service and with the seemingly arbitrary seasonal restrictions on when marriages could take place. Charles I’s refusal to take these grievances seriously and work with Parliament to resolve them contributed to the increasing political tension. The Long Parliament’s clamor for marriage reform demonstrates that frustration over the nature of the marriage ritual played a role in the general movement toward the regicide. Indeed, if some members of Parliament viewed the Caroline regime as exhibiting an undesirable favoritism toward Catholicism, this perception was wrapped up with a perceived leniency toward the practice of clandestine marriage. The “Root and Branch” petition blamed “the government of archbishops and lord bishops, deans and archdeacons” for a number of social evils, including “the growth of popery,” “the licensing of marriages without banns asking,” and “the great increase and frequency of whoredoms
and adulteries, occasioned by the prelates’ corrupt administration of justice.”

As we have seen throughout this book, the practice of clandestine marriage, including “the licensing of marriages without banns asking,” often went hand in hand with fears concerning the “growth of popery.” In 1641, the dismantling of the established Church of England began, abolishing the authority and regulating forces of the church courts along with it. The Commons appointed an assembly to create a new church government and liturgy to replace the *Book of Common Prayer*. One of the Commons’ requests to the assembly was to “consider of some Course to prevent the Mischiefs that happen by clandestine Marriages, and by the marrying of People by Laymen.”

By looking forward to this history, we can see that the practice of clandestine marriage not only was at the heart of the Reformation but also played a role in the events leading to the English Revolution.

Like clandestine marriage, the general topic of incest permeated early modern culture. Church officials argued over the definition of incest and how to interpret the prohibited degrees of kinship laid out in Leviticus. The Church of England regularly issued pamphlets to clarify the dizzying array of incestuous possibilities. Incest’s association with transgressive desire further links the act with the transgressive desire often associated with clandestine marriage.

Romeo and Juliet’s own passionate love certainly contradicts the careful delineation between sexual desire and the kind of marital companionship that most Protestant moralists espoused. Dympna Callaghan links this disapproval with the couple’s Catholicism. She consents that the association of clandestine marriage with Catholic nuptial rites may “have made them decidedly less sympathetic to an Elizabethan audience than they seem to contemporary theatergoers.” Lawrence Stone has even gone so far to claim that an early modern audience would have been entirely disapproving of the lovers since they bring “destruction upon themselves by violating the norms of the society in which they lived.” An early modern audience, therefore, may have been ready to condemn Romeo and Juliet for similar reasons that they would condemn Annabella and Giovanni.

Shakespeare’s tragedy, however, easily affords a sympathetic reading of the young lovers. In *Romeo and Juliet*, clandestine marriage does not serve as a site of deception for the purpose of sexual fulfillment that so often marks the negative literary portrayals of clandestine marriage that we have seen. Instead, Juliet rejects the hastiness sometimes associated with irregular unions when proclaiming during the balcony scene, “I have no joy of this contract to-night” (2.2.117). Even though she agrees to exchange “love’s faithful vow” (2.2.127) with Romeo, which could serve as a *de praesenti* contract, she also insists that they properly solemnize their nuptials so that the vows are not “too rash, too
unadvis’d, too sudden” (2.2.118) (or at least are less so). She dictates her terms to Romeo. By insisting that they participate in the religious “rite,” she refuses to acknowledge a mere “contract” as a marriage, even though such a contract would have been legally binding under canon law. In doing so, Juliet ensures that Romeo cannot renge on his marital vows, and that the basis of his vows does not derive from desire alone—he must profess a love for her that will last over time in the presence of at least one other witness (i.e., Friar Laurence). Romeo’s willingness to participate in an actual solemnization confirms the sincerity of his matrimonial promises in the eyes of both Juliet and the audience.

Since Annabella and Giovanni are siblings, they cannot gain the consent of even an unscrupulous friar to marry them via a religious solemnization. The horrified Bonaventura associates Giovanni’s incestuous lust with a “devilish atheism” (1.1.8) that “fill[s] the world.” Richard A. McCabe observes that Giovanni’s rejection of religious precepts “reflects that of a new and more rationalistic age.” When justifying his love for his sister, however, Giovanni’s language echoes that of the Protestant marital discourses that championed the virtues of wedded love, and that might have made an early modern audience more open to Shakespeare’s young lovers. He proclaims:

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 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?

(1.1.28–34)

Giovanni’s obsession with disputation hinges on his attempt to situate his desire within a widely accepted religious framework. Here he conjures the popular biblical definition of marriage that a man and woman become “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). According to Giovanni’s perverse logic, the fact that he and Annabella already make up “one flesh” since they shared “one womb” means that, in a sense, they are married already. Shockingly, the kind of discourse that allows Protestant Reformers to exalt the marital bond in similar terms serves Giovanni’s attempt to justify entering into a sexual relationship with his sister. The discourse of wedded love that many scholars now view as one of the period’s defining legacies, a discourse that contributed to the rise of companionate marriage, thus fuels the first portrayal of sibling incest on the early modern stage.
Annabella and Giovanni cannot solemnize their marriage as do Romeo and Juliet, but the practice of clandestine marriage enables them to imbue their vows of faith with marital meaning. After realizing that they love one another, they enter into a marital contract:

\[\text{Annabella:} \quad \text{On my knees,} \]
\[\text{Brother, even by our mother’s dust, I charge you,} \]
\[\text{Do not betray me to your mirth or hate.} \]
\[\text{Love me or kill me, brother.} \]
\[\text{Giovanni:} \quad \text{On my knees,} \]
\[\text{Sister, even by my mother’s dust, I charge you,} \]
\[\text{Do not betray me to your mirth or hate.} \]
\[\text{Love me or kill me, sister.} \]

(1.2.261–267)

This scene resembles the clandestine contract between the Duchess and Antonio in *The Duchess of Malfi*, discussed in the introduction. Quite unlike the Duchess and Antonio’s expressions of love and fidelity, Annabella and Giovanni’s vows constitute a negative injunction: “love me or kill me.” Their contract is perverse, but it also carries weight and solemnity. The siblings seal their “troth” with a kiss before consummating the match. While an early modern audience would not have believed that Annabella and Giovanni could enter into a legal union, neither could Romeo and Juliet, at least not without parental consent. By lowering the age of his heroine from his source’s sixteen to having “not seen the change of fourteen years” (1.2.9), Shakespeare distances his fiction of clandestine marriage from actual marital law in early modern England. That does not keep us—or their fellow characters—from taking their union seriously, however. In a conversation with her father, Annabella further reveals that she and Giovanni have exchanged tokens symbolizing their union:

\[\text{Florio: Where’s the ring,} \]
\[\quad \text{That which your mother in her will bequeathed} \]
\[\quad \text{And charged you on her blessing not to give’t} \]
\[\quad \text{To any but your husband? Send back that.} \]
\[\text{Annabella: I have it not.} \]
\[\text{Florio: Ha! have it not? Where is’t?} \]
\[\text{Annabella: My brother in the morning took it from me,} \]
\[\quad \text{Said he would wear’t today} \]

(2.6.39–45)
The disappointed Florio has no choice but to accept Annabella’s willingness to part from the ring as a sign of youthful caprice. The reader knows, however, that Annabella believes Giovanni to be the “husband” to whom her mother “charg’d” her to give the ring. The fact that Annabella makes this statement so openly, even though her father cannot possibly understand its meaning, demonstrates the extent to which she believes her relationship with her brother constitutes a veritable marriage. The brother and sister do not consider themselves to be merely fulfilling their sexual desire. They have entered into a bond of love that carries marital significance.

Both the Elizabethan and Caroline plays demonstrate that clandestine marriage creates another important marital problem (explored in chapter 3): bigamy. Juliet’s nurse experiences no qualms when suggesting that Juliet enter into a second marriage with Paris (who makes Romeo look like a “dishclout” [3.5.219] anyway). Indeed, once Juliet finds herself betrothed to Paris against her will, her nurse suggests that her young charge simply move forward with the marriage:

I think it best you married with the County.

Beshrow my very heart,
I think you are happy in this second match,
For it excels your first; or if it did not,
Your first is dead, or ‘twere as good he were
As living here and you no use of him.

(3.5.217–225)

The nurse implies that Juliet’s father has made a better match for Juliet than Juliet has made for herself—a statement with which an early modern audience would probably agree. Furthermore, since Romeo’s exile means that he and Juliet cannot cohabitate, the nurse reasons that they do not have a proper marriage. Romeo and Juliet’s inability to fulfill their domestic duties associated with marriage, to be “of use,” means that, in the nurse’s mind, the marriage does not exist. For all essential purposes, Romeo “is dead, or ‘twere as good as he were,” since they cannot establish a household together. The nurse thus makes a valiant (though shaky) effort to invalidate Juliet’s first marriage within a legal framework (Romeo’s dead anyway) so as to make room for a new one. Since Juliet makes her marital vows clandestinely, the nurse argues, they have no social currency.

The idea that private and public contracts can exist simultaneously also makes room for bigamy in ’Tis Pity She’s a Whore. The friar forwards a public
solemnization of a marriage as a solution to Annabella’s pregnancy. He announces, “ ’Tis thus agreed: / First, for your honour’s safety, that you marry / The Lord Soranzo” (3.6.35–37). He further implies that her marriage to Soranzo will go hand in hand with the dissolution of her incestuous relationship when continuing: “next, to save your soul, / Leave off this life and henceforth live to him” (3.6.37–38). The friar oversees a handfasting between Annabella and Soranzo to ensure that she will go through with the match, but he also insists that the handfasting does not constitute a marriage when stating that he will “perform [the ceremony] on the morning sun” (3.6.55). In her private confession, Annabella acknowledges that her ceremonial marriage with Soranzo takes precedence over her incestuous contract with Giovanni. She prays that the “blessed friar” has “joined in ceremonial knot my hand / To him whose wife I now am” (5.1.24–26). Following the lead of Juliet’s nurse, Annabella believes that the public ceremony trumps clandestine vows.

Giovanni, however, rejects such claims. Insisting that his union with Annabella constitutes one of “matchless love” (2.5.46), he proclaims that Annabella’s marriage with Soranzo will “damn her” (2.5.41) rather than result in her salvation. As McCabe observes, “Scene by scene the distinction between marriage, fornication, and adultery is . . . eroded.” In Giovanni’s mind, however, his marriage to Annabella remains irrevocable—just as Juliet views her own marriage to Romeo. He will not live in bigamy. In the end, Giovanni kills Annabella rather than releasing her from their marriage vows, which did include the imperative “Love me or kill me” after all. Both his refusal to release Annabella from the bonds of matrimony and his insistence on adhering to their vows’ violent undertones point to the dangers of assuming that one could easily get out of an ill-advised irregular union, even an incestuous one.

While Shakespeare’s tragedy affords some sympathy for the young lovers, Ford’s play reveals that such sympathetic portrayals of clandestine marriage are no longer possible. When Giovanni enters the stage with Annabella’s heart on a dagger, any sympathy we had for the young lovers, or at least for Giovanni, is gone. ‘’Tis Pity does not end with an attempt at reconciliation as does Romeo and Juliet, but with a corrupt cardinal remarking: “Of one so young, so rich in nature’s store, / Who could not say ’ ’Tis pity she’s a whore?’” (5.6.162–163). Annabella and Giovanni will not be remembered for their love and commitment to one another, as are Romeo and Juliet, but for Annabella’s whorish nature. As we have seen again and again, people, particularly women, who marry clandestinely open themselves up to unsavory perceptions, whether those perceptions are fair and warranted or not. Annabella and Giovanni’s love may elicit our pity, but not our admiration.
Ford’s dark revision of Shakespeare’s play thus suggests a fear that the practice of clandestine marriage could result in couples not just eloping in defiance of their family’s wishes but marrying clandestinely in defiance of the very laws of nature. In penning his cautionary tale, therefore, Ford points to the dangers of England’s continued adherence to Roman canon law long after Spenser’s rejection of it in *The Faerie Queene*, book I, and during a time when Catholicism held favor in the English court. In Ford’s play, the discourses of wedded love that became so popular during the early modern period become unmoored from any legal apparatus, encouraging couples to define the marital bond, at least within the realm of fiction, entirely for themselves.