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'Tis Pity She's A Whore Is About Much More Than Incest

John Ford's sensational Jacobean play *'Tis Pity She's A Whore* attracts attention due to the outlandish and highly forbidden love between two siblings, Giovanni and Annabella. Although the incestuous theme initially protrudes, several more complex themes are layered beneath the surface of the play. Other vital themes in *'Tis Pity She's A Whore* analyze religious power and devotion, deception, marriage expectations, and homosocial relationships. The principal characters have agendas, plotting against one another for love, honor, and societal rank. The play possesses an incestuous component but certainly incorporates far more compelling themes, probing many elements of 17th-century society.

Religious relevance, specifically the power of the Church, is an apparent theme from the beginning of the production. In Act I, Scene I, Giovanni seeks emotional advice from a devoted Catholic Friar. The Friar advises him to repent for his sin of loving his sister by instructing him to "fall down on both thy knees, and grovel on the ground; cry to thy heart, wash every word thou utter'st in tears, and if't be possible, of blood," in order to regain God's favor. He then claims that it is imperative that Giovanni "beg heaven to cleanse the leprosy of lust that rots thy soul" (Act 1, Scene 1, Lines 70-72). The Friar's advice is followed dutifully.

Not only does the Friar work as an authoritative figure over Giovanni, but the other leading characters also follow his behavioral advice, solicited as wishes from God. For instance, in Act V, Scene I, the Friar urges Annabella to take her own life in repentance for her love affair. Annabella takes his words seriously and resolves to follow through with the act. The scene ends with the Friar telling Annabella, "Live to die more blest!" to which she responds by saying, "Thanks to the heavens, who have prolonged my breath to this good use. Now I can welcome

death” (Act 5, Scene 1, Lines 57-59). This demonstrates Annabella’s devout commitment to regaining God’s favor. Likewise, the Friar occasionally counsels Hippolita, Soranzo, and Vasques on morality, lecturing them on the importance of maintaining faith and trust in God. That being said, the characters all repeatedly go against the rules of Catholicism by committing sinful acts of adultery and murder. Despite frequent references to God, all of the character’s religious beliefs take a back seat to their personal agendas.

Next, acts of deception are demonstrated by several of the play’s central characters. Soranzo fools Ricardetto by sending him on a quest to certain death out of lust for Hippolita. Likewise, Hippolita deceives her husband, Ricardetto, for Soranzo, to which Soranzo betrays Hippolita by pursuing Annabella. Annabella deceives Soranzo by neglecting to share the truth about her pregnancy with him, and Soranzo later goes on to betray Annabella rather severely by attempting to kill her at the end of Act V. These duplicitous plot points illuminate how each character prioritizes their self-interest over others. As the steady stream of scandals slowly unravels, each betrayal evokes strong emotional reactions and is met with harsh insults such as “lying Coward” or “Deceitful creature.”

All the characters fool one another, but the theme of deception is most prominently represented by the servant Vasques. Vasques schemes relentlessly and aids in helping Annabella’s uncle, Richardetto, who has disguised himself as a doctor, in exposing Annabella’s affair. Furthermore, Vasques fakes an alliance with Hippolita, targeted at exposing Florio’s affair. He betrays Hippolita and reveals her plot, ambitiously seeking to gain favoritism in the house. Although the other characters reap the consequences of their deceptions, Vasques is one of the few surviving principal characters.

Next, the various affairs throughout *'Tis Pity* between Soranzo and Hippolita, Annabella and Giovanni, and Florio and Putana display the double standard for men and women who have committed infidelity in Renaissance Italy. For example, Annabella is chastised far more than Giovanni for their relationship. This is represented through the title and closing line of the play, which remarks, "Who could not say, 'Tis pity *she's* a Whore?" (Act 5, Scene 7). Likewise, Hippolita is reprimanded for her affair and called a "mistress she-devil," whereas Soranzo is scolded by neither his confidant Vasques nor the Friar.

That said, Soranzo's entanglement with Hippolita is not his only love affair that should be reviewed while exploring 17th-century societal norms. Soranzo's relationship with Annabella exemplifies both the gender expectations and the rebellion against them, in love and marriage. First, Annabella's father, Florio, grants Annabella permission to marry for love rather than economic gain. Love and marriage in the Jacobethan era were not interchangeable. Marriage was a financial agreement arranged between the men of each household, involving a large dowry to be paid by the bride's father. Annabella, however, aims to marry for love and is offered the rare opportunity to do so when her father, Florio, denies the engagement money proposed to him by Bergetto's father, Donado. Although Annabella's refusal to marry is rather proto-feminist, her pregnancy leads to her unfortunate, convenience-based marriage to Soranzo. In Act IV, Scene 3, Annabella goes as far as to tell Soranzo, "you were deceived in me: 'twas not for love I chose you, but for honour" (Act 4, Scene 3, Lines 22-23). While Soranzo may claim to have pursued Annabella for love, the competition for her hand was not held out of the desire for her heart but rather as a contest between males for power, status, and appraisal. Annabella's suitors rarely mention her personality and often refer to her as "Florio's daughter" rather than by her own name. The men love the *idea* of being with her, not her herself.

The theme of love and marriage can be evaluated further after Annabella commits to Soranzo. As Annabella's husband, Soranzo views her as property. Upon discovering Annabella's adulterous affair, he is devastated- not by the fact that the unborn child was someone else's- but more by how her actions reflect on his honor and social standing amongst other males. Annabella's affair challenges the status quo, flipping preconceived notions of gender roles. Societally, it was more common for men to seek relationships outside of their marriages, as opposed to the wife being the unfaithful one. Soranzo feels disgraced by being cuckolded and seeks immediate vengeance for what he feels has been 'taken' from him. This eventually leads to a duel with Giovanni in which both men die at each other's hand.

To evaluate *Tis Pity She's A Whore* in its entirety, spectators must regard the show through lenses broader than the apparent incest plot point. This Jacobean tragedy inspects important ideologies of religious power, deception, marriage normalities, and homosocial relationships. The individual agendas of each character lead to a tragic unwinding of events spurred by love, honor, and toxic masculinity. When viewers look past the incestuous component of the production, they will find that John Ford's work contains far more than what initially meets the eye.

References

Ford, John. *Tis Pity She's a Whore*. London, Methuen, 1975.