

Gilles Monsarrat, Brian Vickers, and R.J.C. Watt (eds). *The Collected Works of John Ford, Vol. 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp xxiv, 720.

PATRICK J. MURRAY
University of Glasgow

Early Theatre 17.1 (2014), 233–236
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12745/et.17.1.19>

Some thirty years before John Ford wrote, in collaboration with Thomas Dekker and William Rowley, his first play *The Witch of Edmonton*, Christopher Marlowe endeavoured to initiate a clear break from the prevailing conventions of sixteenth-century dramaturgy. The prologue to his immensely successful *Tamburlaine* (1590) announces:

From jiggging veins of rhyming mother wits,
And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay,
We'll lead you to the stately tent of war,
Where you shall hear the Scythian Tamburlaine
Threatening the world with high astounding terms,
And scourging kingdoms with his conquering sword. (Prologue 1–6)

Ostensibly, Marlowe attempts to turn from frivolity ('clownage') to weightier and more serious subjects ('stately tent of war'). Allied to this change of subject, however, there is also a noticeable attempt at establishing a generic division — the prologue announces a move away from the prevailing characteristics of dramatic poetry such as 'jiggging veins', 'rhyming mother wits' and 'conceits' to a more concerted employment of rhetoric or 'high astounding terms'.

Yet while Marlowe seeks to turn away from some of the poetic conventions that prevailed in the previous generation of English drama, his retention and indeed prodigious exploitation of metre conveys the centrality of poetry to early modern theatre. As such, knowledge of non-dramatic works of the early modern period, and poetry in particular, enables a fuller awareness of individual dramatic writers and their oeuvres — alongside Marlowe, other playwrights such as Shakespeare, Middleton, Jonson, and Webster all wrote poetry as well as plays — and also a greater understanding of the dramatic works themselves. Examination of their work reveals an alertness to the possibilities of poetry and its forms in dramatic literature. For example, one of the key conceits employed by Shakespeare in the establishment of the intertwining love of Romeo and Juliet is the collaborative composition of sonnets

in their interactions. Upon their first encounter (act 1, scene 5, 93–106) fourteen lines of iambic pentameter and their intricate internal structures are skilfully interwoven with dramatic utterance to reveal instantly the deep intimacy of the star-crossed lovers.

As such, a holistic approach to a writer's work, not just in drama but in other genres as well, is immensely beneficial, especially in a period marked by stylistic and generic variety. Volume 1 of *The Collected Works of John Ford* concentrates solely on Ford's prose and poetry. When we consider Ford's pre-eminence as a dramatist in the popular imagination, this focus seems slightly surprising. What the endeavours of Monsarrat, Vickers, and Watt reveal in the first book in this intended three-volume series, however, is the diversity of Ford's non-dramatic oeuvre. Furthermore, it conveys Ford's considerable skill not just as a dramatic rhetorician (most obviously displayed in *Perkin Warbeck*) but also as a poet and prose writer. Ford's poetry in particular, produced largely before he embarked on a career in the theatre, is a cornucopia of style, subject, and form. Religious meditations sit alongside abecedarian verse (685), dedicatory poems (678), didactic prose-verse hybrids (83–105), laudatory songs (110), and elegies employing various rhyming forms (660–2). The volume also includes an extensive introduction, incorporating a timeline of 'attempt[s] to collect the writing of John Ford' (1) since the mid-seventeenth century (attesting to the popularity of the writer, and indeed the persistent difficulty of such a task) (ix–xvii); an overview of Ford's poetry-writing career by Brian Vickers (1–11); and lastly an extensive, eloquent, and elucidatory biographical survey entitled 'John Ford: The Early Years (1586–1620)' (12–38). This last editorial feature sketches out the various religious, social and cultural discourses prevailing in the period of Ford's emergence as a professional writer. Additionally, it relates the various circumstances of Ford's personal life: his familial background in Devonshire, his training as a lawyer at the Inns of Court and its influence on his writing, and also his various associations within 'the gentlemen of the Inns' who according to P.J. Finkelppearl represented 'the largest single group of literate and cultured men in London'.¹ Meticulously annotated and rich with archival research — one hundred and nine separate footnotes for little more than twenty-five pages — it stands as the most extensive biography of Ford's early years yet published. Moreover, it reaches some significant conclusions on its subject: while Ford's religious sympathies have been pondered elsewhere, Monsarrat states definitively that 'it would seem that [Ford] had no sympathy for Catholicism' (33).

The purpose of the volume is to collate Ford's non-dramatic works. Encompassing eight longer poems and other works in prose and verse, Ford's output in this field covers a wide range of subjects as well as a range of forms, from verse celebration of monarchical events ('The Monarches meeting: or The King of Denmarks welcome into England') to lyrical religious rumination ('Christes Bloodie Sweat') and pamphlets on the ideal life ('The Golden Meane'). Each prose work is given a substantial introduction by its editors, alongside a reproduction of the original frontispiece and line-by-line exegesis. Frequently, these do more than explain or gloss abstruse formulations, often helping to contextualize the allusions of Ford within the wider socio-cultural world of England in the early seventeenth century. A case in point is the annotation to Ford's 'Honor triumphant. To the Right Noble Lord, the Duke of Lennox his Grace' where the writer alludes to those 'who in the rancorous spleens of an unprevailing rancour, durst not onlie in the malice of their tongues to speake, but in the venome of their hearts, to copy out whole pamphlets against the dignitie of the female sex' (87). Here Monsarrat elaborates on Ford's reference to those who 'copy out whole pamphlets' of misogynistic tracts by citing several popular 'pamphlets against women' published in the time of Ford's work, for example Thomas Nashe's *Anatomic of Absurditie: Contayning a breefe confutation of the slender imputed praises to feminine perfection* (1589) and *Pleasant Quippes for upstart new-fangled gentlewomen* (1595); and also naming contemporaneous 'books praising and defending women' such as Elyot's *The Defence of Good Women* (1645), Breton's *Jane Anger, her Protection for Women* (1589) and Gibson's *A Womans Woorth, defended against all the men in the world* (1599) (137). Such notes enable a greater understanding of the intellectually vibrant cultural milieu from which Ford and his writings emerged, and provide an invaluable overview of the literary context of the writer's oeuvre. Additionally, there are some appropriate addenda depending on the poem; for example, the overtly religious 'Christes Bloodie Sweat' is afforded an extensive list of the biblical provenance of particular phrases, evocations, and references in the poem (398–9).

Perhaps of most interest to scholars of early modern theatre is the most extensive reproduction and analysis yet published of Ford's elegy on the death of his fellow playwright John Fletcher, discovered in 1999 (658–65). A characteristic of the output of English dramatists working in and around London in the seventeenth century, 'tribute of verse', to borrow John Donne's eloquent phrase, was composed by the likes of Jonson, Rowley, and Middleton

to honour, promote and even aggrandize their fellow dramatists. Ford's own plays were published alongside commendatory lyrics by George Donne (*The Lover's Melancholy*) and the writer Thomas Ellice (*'Tis Pity She's a Whore*). In turn, Ford also contributed poetic introductions to John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and James Shirley's 'ingenious comedy' *The Wedding* among others. Vickers speculates that Ford's friendship with Fletcher had been ongoing for a number of years, with the older dramatist acting as a supervisor of sorts for Ford's initial forays into dramatic literature, for example *Laws of Candy* (ca 1619–20). Tellingly, Ford concludes his elegy with recognition of the perceived importance of 'poetry' to the success of drama for Renaissance playwrights:

He that desires
Fame by desert, and be a Poett knowne,
Must write like Fletcher, or he must be none. (662; l 110–12)

Emphasizing the cross-pollination of the genres of poetry and drama, Ford's conflation of 'Poett' and dramatist lends a particular resonance to this volume. In reproducing and consolidating Ford's poetry and prose in one single book, the editors have simultaneously brought greater attention to his non-dramatic work and set the stage for the forthcoming editions of the writer's singly and collaboratively authored plays.

Notes

- 1 P.J. Finkelpearl, *John Marston of the Middle Temple: An Elizabethan Dramatist in His Social Setting* (Cambridge, 1969), 5.