

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



## Reflections on *John Ford's Story* by MED Theatre's Young Company, 2011

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In 2011 I was lucky enough to be part of a MED Theatre production about the life of the Dartmoor-born playwright John Ford around the time when he was writing *Love's Sacrifice*, one of his tragedies. I wrote the scenes in the play where he interacts with the characters of *Love's Sacrifice* as if they were alive and actually participating in his writing. This I'm sure is not a novel idea for any playwright, for personifying one's words on paper and forming empathy for each life-like character in order to better their development seems natural. But when Ford's characters start having too much likeness to the people in his own life as speculated by the team at MED Theatre, he realises they are doomed while at the same time finding through them how to cope with his own love loss.

In addition to penning these scenes, being able to be part of the production in a musical capacity was a real treat too. We worked to come up with music that would evoke the sounds of the era for the dancers. Although modern-type violins were not that widespread in the time John Ford was writing it is not unlikely that there would have been some Baroque equivalents in Devon at the time.<sup>1</sup>

Having the great barn at Buckland Abbey as the performance space was really special as it was owned around the time John Ford flourished by Richard Grenville, one of the dominant Devon figures of his day, whom we reference in our story. He eventually married Mary Howard, a Dartmoor woman whom we speculated John Ford had met and fallen for. Performing a play in a site-specific location is something that MED likes to do and I feel it adds an extra layer to the experience, knowing full well that your characters might be standing where their namesakes did some 500 years ago. The use of

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://youtu.be/TTsQAD58XIU>

some of the original language from the text of *Love's Sacrifice*, modal music echoing the style of the seventeenth century and the era's costume all contributed to conjure up the atmosphere for the audience.

In this story we romanticised the idea that John Ford was fighting against himself, accidentally writing a kind of *roman à clef*, a play based on his own life with an overlay of fiction. In our play, Ford didn't want to be found out by his acquaintances for writing what is a poorly disguised account of their lives, but similarly he was so caught up in the tragedy of their situations that he couldn't help himself. In this story, through writing *Love's Sacrifice* he came to terms with what we speculated was happening in his own life, and this helped him grow and move on from it.

One of the most interesting parts of creating this play was learning about Ford's character. I say 'learning' hesitantly because there were not many records of his personality. However, his 'melancholy' was noted in the literature. His investigation into negative psychologies through his tragedies could have been a reflection of his own condition:

Deep in a dump alone John Ford was gat,  
With folded arms and melancholy hat. (*Choice Drollery*, 1656)

Therefore, in the sections of *John Ford's Story* that were tasked to me to write featuring the composition of *Love's Sacrifice*, I ran with that word melancholy; and many of the stage directions involve Ford suddenly taking a negative turn. I did intend for some of it to come across as slightly petulant and humorous: his changes of states are often so rushed, and of course it would be dull from a theatrical point of view to have a constantly miserable protagonist. This is also a recurring theme in *Love's Sacrifice*, where the characters suddenly change their minds (Bianca, I'm looking at you), so I thought it fitting that John Ford himself showed this trait. Also, although *Love's Sacrifice* is a tragedy, I don't think it would be fair to call Ford's life such, so I tried to add in a bit of humour amongst his angst. I used the exasperation of the characters he is writing to lighten the mood a little. I also managed to squeeze in a line that was used as a criticism of John Ford's play by the poet Richard Crashaw: 'What is Love's Sacrifice but The Broken Heart', which I thought very beautiful.

In the final scenes, Jack (Ford) knows he must kill off his main characters so as not to arouse the suspicion of his more influential friends, so as author he takes on the role of Duke Caraffa in carrying out the deed that means the deaths of the chaste lovers. Bianca is killed by Caraffa himself and then Fernando drinks poison, after which Caraffa

realises his error and ends his own life. This could be symbolic of Ford's detachment from Mary Howard, who had by this time married Richard Grenville; Jack has come to terms with the death of the doomed lovers and can now start afresh in reality. Ford's characters are commonly destroyed by love, and I hope it came across in our play that it would be somewhat of a vanity of sorrow to think John Ford thought this of himself too.

Although we did research the life and times of John Ford as far as we could, much of this project was artistic licence granted by the fact that not very much is known about Ford's personal life. We ourselves I suppose were writing a *roman à clef* without many constraints. I have to say it was a fantastic experience; Devon has such a literary rich history and I was happy to be invited to be a part of it!