

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Directing *The Lady's Trial*

Perry Mills

King Edward VI School, Stratford-upon-Avon

pem@kes.net

When Patrick Spottiswoode, Director of Globe Education, asked me if Edward's Boys¹ would be prepared to contribute to his project entitled The Ford Experiment by staging *The Lady's Trial* in 2015 I must admit that I was unaware that Ford had written plays for boys. It turns out that the original performers were 'Beeston's Boys', a rather different kind of boys' company from those of 30-40 years earlier which provide our usual repertoire.² Always keen to accept a challenge, I agreed and we prepared for two runs: the first in March (Oxford, Walsall and Stratford-upon-Avon) and the second in September (two nights at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse).

It was only then that I learned that no one has attempted to stage the play since 1638. This posed a number of challenges. Obviously, there was going to be little to guide us – no previous performances to steal from, and practically no academic comment at all.

An email to Professor Lisa Hopkins, editor of the Revels edition of the play, was virtually the first thing I did. I introduced myself and our plans and asked if she would be prepared to advise us. Her positive response was crucial to any success we subsequently achieved.

¹ Since about 2007 Edward's Boys, from King Edward VI School, Stratford-upon-Avon, have been performing plays from the neglected repertoire of the early modern boys' companies. Under the direction of Perry Mills, Deputy Head of the school, the company has staged plays by Marlowe, Marston, Dekker, Webster, Middleton, Lyly and Ford. Edward's Boys have toured extensively, by invitation, to the universities of Oxford, London, Warwick and Cambridge, and performed at the RSC Swan Theatre, Middle Temple Hall, and at Shakespeare's Globe's Bear Gardens and Sam Wanamaker Playhouse.

² There is a full archive of each production, including films which can be ordered on DVD. Further details are available on the company website at www.edwardsboys.org

One of the problems with this play is that, on the whole, pretty much nothing happens. Even the *potentially* exciting stuff happens off-stage. An early surprise – and there were to be many – to strike us in rehearsal was that the ‘great moment’ when Aurelio tells Auria that his wife has been unfaithful to him actually takes place *between* Act 3, Scene 2 and Act 3, Scene 3.

The obscurity of the narrative was an additional challenge. As well as the sheer complexity of the plots, there are the ‘holes’, those unexplained gaps which left us scratching our heads. Since it was no longer possible to ask questions of Ford, the next best thing was to send emails to Lisa Hopkins after several rehearsals...

Clarity of storytelling is a very important quality in the Edward’s Boys project. Such was the level of difficulty posed by this play, I was bullied by the cast into giving a short introduction to the audience every evening in order to explain the three plots and provide some context. I had never felt the need to do this before, and with hindsight it was probably unnecessary, but my relenting seemed to reassure the cast.

Everyone agreed that Ford’s text was far harder to understand – and to learn – than Lyly’s *Galatea* which we had performed in 2014. The sheer length of speeches and sentences, the twist and turns of the thoughts, the obscurity of phrasing, and the uncertainty of tone all added to the ‘challenge’. Even Ford seems to be aware of this and provides ironic self-criticism at one point: ‘Hid now, most likely i’t’h darkness of your speech’ (Act 4, Scene 3, 15-6) is how Auria expresses it to Adurni.

And then there is the *generic* oddness. It is a tragi-comedy, sure, but not of the kind you find with, say, Beaumont and Fletcher where you usually know whether a scene or moment is ‘tragi-’ or ‘comedy’. Here the tone is far more questionable and disconcerting. Questions like, ‘Is that *really* funny?’ were frequently followed minutes later by, ‘How can anyone take *that* seriously?’

Perhaps all this goes some way to explaining why *The Lady’s Trial* has been ignored for so long.

I chose to treat these details – as far as I possibly could – as advantages rather than obstacles, as what Ford intended, deliberate choices on his part: as routes to the core of the play. In this way I hoped we would discover the precise effects of this sort of writing for the stage.

As always, our approach began with very close textual analysis. The three discrete plots are each focussed on women (Spinella, Levidolche and Amoretta) and combine in complementary and oblique ways. Slowly we began to identify the patterns which reflected upon and defined one another.

We started to notice that what is most important in a scene or exchange is frequently unstated. Focussing on subtext and submerged expression made the play feel startlingly modern. I recall one actor say in a rehearsal: 'When I come onstage I'm full of so many different thoughts and feelings I'm not certain what to say and how to say it!'

We also discovered a situation which cropped up again and again: a character appears to be talking about one thing when they are *in fact* thinking about something else. I even showed a few minutes of a filmed performance of Pinter's *Betrayal* to those playing Auria, Spinella, Aurelio and Castanna as inspiration. Rapidly we learned to approach Ford in the manner you would approach Pinter: don't look for clear motives and solutions – that way madness lies...

We started to find that the narrative fog was less significant than we had originally thought. It's not so much what the characters *do* as what they *think* and *feel* - and try *not* to say!

As we picked over the text we could now discern particular linguistic mannerisms. Many of the characters, particularly in the main plot, employ a curiously involved style, full of abstraction, circumlocution and indirect metaphor. Furthermore, there is much evidence throughout of conscious repetitions, parallelisms and similar cadences. These very repetitions (echoes, quotation of another's or your own previously spoken words) seemed now to us to suggest what was obsessing the characters – or at least that *something* was obsessing them, even if we couldn't work out what.

Exchanges between Auria and Aurelio, Auria and Spinella, Spinella and Malfato, and Levidolche and Benazzi acquired an almost Modernist quality in the ways that the language fractured and fragmented – so much 'suggestion' was being packed in. At other times brief lines resonated back and forth across the play ('She's my wife... Make not your house my prison... home... friend... do not, sister, reject the use of fate'). The expression started to become thrilling rather than obscure and leaden. This led to the search for appropriate modes of delivery, which were often urgent, hushed tones, vibrant with pent-up feeling. Although there were moments which suggested speaking at volume we constantly exploited the advantages of the speaking voice or quieter. In Walsall we performed in a school hall with the audience only feet away from the action.

The actor playing Auria commented how he could ‘just talk’ and still be heard. We had decided to accentuate this effect in specific scenes, most obviously in Act 3, Scene 4 which we set in a chapel. There is no textual evidence to suggest to what location Benazzi’s line, ‘this the place’ (line 2), should refer. We felt the choice of a chapel as the location for arranging assassinations would suit the perverseness of Levidolche’s character. It allowed us to take advantage of Ford’s predilection for ceremony and gave us licence to introduce smells and bells. It also meant almost every line needed to be delivered as a whisper – except when it wasn’t, and everyone turned round. Intensity and sacrilege emphasised at the same time!



Photo: ‘Chapel’ ([view full size image](#)).

At times these emotions seemed almost too overwhelming to be expressed or indeed understood (the prime example must be Spinella and Malfato in Act 4, Scene 1). In scene after scene we found extraordinary tension: extreme self-control struggling to suppress emotional abandon. Sometimes we found that a character’s silent response did not reflect passivity or a disinterestedness, but the only available option. In her review of our production for the school magazine Lisa Hopkins commented that silence became ‘almost a character in itself’. Ford seems to have pre-figured not only Pinter, but Beckett as well.

As audiences know with these two twentieth century playwrights, the line between ‘tense’ and ‘boring’ is a porous space. Working on *The Lady’s Trial* we had to be constantly aware of the real danger of slipping between one state and the other without realising it. One means of conveying the enormous intellectual and emotional struggle was through the use of formality and restraint. We introduced music between most scenes in order to make the rhythms of that formality ever more evident. We found a theatrical metaphor in both the music and the movement. The pavane became a key structural device – movement and music creating and emphasising mood.

We should not forget that there is a great deal of comedy in this play as well, which accounts in part for the strange, uneasy, lurching shifts in tone. The prime ‘ministers of mirth’ are the Spaniard Guzman and the Dutchman Fulgoso, who are both farcical and ridiculous in the most obvious ways. (Casual racism is never far away in Early Modern Comedy.) Even a certain leading Ford scholar of our acquaintance was unsure that these scenes could ever be funny... Not only are we asked to laugh at foreigners, but at their ‘love interest’, a character afflicted with the worst lisp in the world! In spite of the crude and downright silly stereotypes on display it worked – indeed, probably because of them, together, of course, with the employment of ‘comic business’ and ludicrous accents. Perhaps such scenes offered some relief from the requirement to listen so hard to the convoluted sentences and subtle emotional nuance of other parts of the play?



Photo: Guzman and Fulgoso ([view full size image](#)).

To our surprise, the very strange subplot involving Levidolche and Benazzi provoked much laughter, but generally it was occasioned by the extreme reactions of Martino, the Pantalone figure, the silly old great-uncle of Levidolche. (As well as Shakespeare's *Othello*, Ford had a thing about uncles too, it seems).

Of the several different questions we discussed in rehearsal – what is a ‘real’ friend? how great a sin is poverty? – the overriding one was: how do men *regard* women? The female characters are constantly being watched, being heard and being judged. This led to our use of the *podium* in the centre of the performance space: sometimes it was a pedestal, sometimes the ‘dock’ in a court of law, sometimes just a raised square to be ignored. Exposed in this way there is nowhere to hide. As I said in my introduction to the audience: ‘If you put someone on a pedestal it leaves them little room for manoeuvre...’ Subsequently we realised that incorporating picture frames into the set and the action provided a striking visual image for an exploration of the motivations and processes and consequences of judgement. And indeed control. Pictures are limited by the dimensions of their frames.



Photo: Spinella in Frames ([view full size image](#)).

The use of the podium and the frames combined served to emphasise the erotic attraction for men of perceived purity in women.

This play is greatly concerned with exposing misogyny and men making decisions for and about women. However, the men in the play – indeed in everyday life – would never see it like that. Consciously or self-consciously, their self-defence would generally be: ‘But it’s only because we love you so much!’ Just as the racism is thoughtless, so is the misogyny. How should we respond to Auria, for example? Are we to admire this man? His self-satisfied arrogance, his smugness, his need to control events and feelings strike the men in the play as simply being a caring husband. And of course he is. It is interesting to note that his behaviour didn’t provoke laughter as a similar character might in Jacobean city or Restoration comedies. This connects with the casual cruelty enacted by trying his wife falsely. We were devastated early in the rehearsal process when we recognised that even though he professes to ‘trust’ his wife, he doesn’t actually bother to tell her that the whole trial is an artifice: hence her emotional and physical collapse. What is Auria’s motive in staging the false trial, anyway? If it is a staged demonstration and public acknowledgement of her virtue then the process is brutal, to say the least. And does he have accomplices in this plot? Aurelio, Adurni, Benazzi? How much has he confided in each? And why? It is all deeply puzzling...

This obsession with judgement is, of course, made explicit in the very title. We focus on a woman: *Lady’s* (although one reference makes it *Ladies*). She (or they) is on trial – subject to a legal investigation, scrutiny of the closest kind. As we rehearsed and considered how best to engage the audience, we found almost every line could be delivered as a testimony to the jury in a court of law: challenging, desperate to convince, and demanding a response.

If it was about how men regard women it was, of course, equally about how we should all regard men. Poignantly poised on the brink, accuser and accused confront one another, and thereby provide a trial for the spectator in judgement and discrimination. How do we judge Spinella when her greatest fear seems to be losing her husband? And what about the extraordinary Levidolche? Her attitude seems to be: ‘If society calls me a whore anyway, I may as well be one!’ And Auria’s decision to match Castanna with Adurni at the end fair takes your breath away. Castanna’s response is: ‘I dare not question the will of heaven’. We thought about the tone of that line for a long time...

Furthermore, from the start of the rehearsal period I found it fascinating that this play was performed by a boys' company (albeit a rather different one). And in the intimate space of the Cockpit Theatre³ at a time (the late 1630s) when there were more 'middle-class' women going to plays. Respectable ladies were by now forming a noticeable proportion of the audience and playwrights seem to have responded by writing plays concerned with the position of women in the home. Early on I wrote myself a big note: 'WE MUST INVOLVE WOMEN IN PREPARING OUR PRODUCTION!' (I should add that it didn't stop at the preparatory stages). The proximity of real women in the audience in the intimate space of the Cockpit Theatre, with boys strutting their stuff in wigs, dresses and make-up made the decision to employ period costume inevitable.

This fact that the spectators were completely visible to all, sharing the space with the action, prompted a distant memory from the researches of Andrew Gurr concerning the position of 'gallants' on the stage. I decided to intensify the intimate interconnection between cast and audience by reintroducing the onstage seating. There was some scholarly debate over whether the stools were still allowed by the time of Ford's play, but by this time I was far too wedded to the theatrical possibilities to bother about something as vague as 'authenticity'. I wanted an onstage audience of approximately a dozen.⁴ These 'Mutes', would be 'on the bench', as it were, a self-conscious jury functioning as spectacle as well as spectators.

However, I also realised that we needed women, ('real' women) to be witnessing all of this, close to. And so I resolved to cast females in an Edward's Boys production for the first time. I argue that this decision is not a directorial 'concept' but an attempt to create an illuminating context in which the play becomes vibrant and provocative, providing

³ By a happy coincidence it now seems scholars agree that the plans used for the design of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse at Shakespeare's Globe were most likely copies of plans for the Cockpit/Phoenix.

⁴ In 1639 Richard Heton drew up materials for a patent that he hoped he would get, giving him more control over the company - Queen Henrietta Maria's Men - performing at the Salisbury Court. In it he says that the company should get 'one day's profit wholly to themselves every year in consideration of their want of stools on the stage, which were taken away by His Majesty's command' (Wickham, Berry and Ingram's *English Professional Theatre*, 667; see also Bentley's *Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 6: 8). It's not clear when this 'command' happened, or whether it just affected the Salisbury Court. There's evidence c. 1630 that there was stool-sitting at the Salisbury Court - Randolph's *Muses Looking Glass*, which follows *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* in bringing 'spectators' on stage, suggests that they sit on the stage to watch (the action in the play is very carefully contained). Presumably it happened at some point in the 1630s, but beyond that it's difficult to be certain! (Personal email to the director from Dr Lucy Munro, King's College London).

each audience member with a heightened perception of their own processes as a spectator, a lens, a frame, and ultimately (and paradoxically) refocussing the members of the audience more sharply onto the play rather than each other.

Well, that was my intention.

It was a controversial decision for some, both in the company and in the audience. Did it work? I pretend to hear you ask. That is for others to decide, but my intention was to provide a clear and challenging focus on the ironies Ford throws at us.

At least one member of the audience responded in an equally ironic manner, if a little lighter in tone. After the Oxford performance, an ex-Edward's Boy, studying Medicine at the university, approached me in consternation: 'Where was the final song?' We agreed that it had simply not been possible to end *The Lady's Trial* in our customary favoured, anarchic manner. Instead we chose the 'Staggered Freeze'.



Photo: 'Freeze' ([view full size image](#)).

The 'joy' was palpable as the final tableau of at least four couples and their delighted fellows was held... and held...and held... The rictus grins of the men continued. As a single viola played a slow pavane the female characters broke away from their men and formed a tight-knit group on the podium where they were joined by the female members of the 'Mutes'. The freeze continued painfully...

At the end of the final performance of the initial tour – during the pause – the audience began to applaud '*before they should have!*' The cast held their nerve. The audience stopped applauding. In a way it was a perfect metaphor for the whole production: uncomfortable, uneasy and uncertain.

This was Ford's final play, it seems, but I do not have a sense of winding down or running out of ideas, rather a looking forward. In 1642 theatres closed and his exploration of the treatment of women came to a halt. It was more than two hundred years before Ibsen began to explore sexual politics in this way again. Ford offers us a bitter portrayal of domestic arrangements where deep-rooted misogyny is so ingrained we don't even notice it. Ultimately, however strange and unexplained the characters' motivations and responses, they ended up striking us – and at least some of our audiences – as truthful and depressingly recognisable.

It may have faults, but *The Lady's Trial* is an extraordinary play. I hope it won't be another 378 years before someone stages it again.