

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



## Bergetto - The Prodigal Son Abroad in 'The Iron Age'

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The popularity of prodigal-son type characters in the morality play tradition has long been recognised.<sup>1</sup> Whether a recalcitrant youth or ill-advised monarch, the taint of original sin causes the prodigal representative of humanity to be readily swayed by vice and turned from the path of virtue. Depending on the didactic intent, some of these flawed 'everyman' figures are portrayed as violent and licentious criminals,<sup>2</sup> others are simply youngsters, more foolish than bad, whose moral failings, like the original prodigal son's, stem from ignorance and insufficient parental oversight. This latter type are stereotypically presented as immature, effeminate, vain, pleasure-loving, shallow, materialistic, cowardly, inconstant, and so on.<sup>3</sup>

This stock character was given greater philosophical depth by humanist playwrights who added a layer of Aristotelian ethics to the Christian doctrine.<sup>4</sup> Commonly known as the 'Golden Mean', Aristotle's guide to virtuous behaviour was a dominant cultural paradigm that viewed temperance as the key to ethical conduct.<sup>5</sup> Virtue, Aristotle

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<sup>1</sup> Lily B. Campbell, *Divine Poetry and Drama in Sixteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 194.

<sup>2</sup> The siblings Ismael and Dalila from *Nice Wanton* (Anon, London: John Kyng, c. 1560), or Freewyl and Imagination from *Hyckescorner* (Anon, London: Wynkyn de Worde, 1515) conform to this criminal type.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of immature prodigals include the young Moros from *The Longer Thou Livest, the More Fool Thou Art* (W. Wager, London: Wyllyam How, c. 1559–68) and Mary from *Mary Magdalene* (L. Wager, London: John Charlewood, 1567).

<sup>4</sup> Notable examples include *Magnyfycence* (J. Skelton, London: J. Rastell, c. 1520–22) and *The Contention Betweene Liberalitie and Prodigalitie* (Anon., London: Simon Stafford, 1602).

<sup>5</sup> Joshua Scodel, *Excess and the Mean in Early Modern English Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 2–3.

argues, always exists between two vices, the vice of defect and the vice of excess: ‘fortitude or strength is a meane between feare and folish hardinesse... [whereas] Liberalitie is the mean betwene prodigalite & Avarice’.<sup>6</sup> This approach was extended to provide a general model for virtuous and immoral masculine behaviour. A 1616 translation of Cicero’s *De Officiis* describes the vices associated with the virtue ‘magnanimitie’, a quality that provides ‘noblenesse of minde’.<sup>7</sup> The vice of defect is defined as: ‘fearfulness, cowardlinesse, stupiditie, and other vices of the same kinde’. These weak and effeminate attributes are juxtaposed against the hyper-masculine vices of excess: ‘audaciousnesse, obstinacie, outragious fiercenesse, arrogancie, cruelty, rash confidence, wiewardnesse, anger, rigour, [and] ambition’.<sup>8</sup>

The youthful prodigal characters of morality drama readily assume characteristics of the vice of defect, all of which were culturally associated with immaturity, whilst the Vices who prey upon them, and encourage their depravity and destruction, equally adopt the avaricious traits associated with the vice of excess. However, it is important to note that not all vices were created equal, and one vice is always closer to virtue than the other: ‘it is to be knowen that ther is a greater contrary from the one extreme to the other, then it is from the meane to the extremes, yet the one is more nere to the meane then is the other’.<sup>9</sup> A contemporary audience would therefore have recognised that though the prodigal character was morally flawed, the Vices who preyed upon him were far worse, and possibly even demonic. Thus the parable of the prodigal son and Aristotle’s golden mean were syncretically utilised to illustrate a single didactic point that stressed the sinful alterity and moral vulnerability of youth and immaturity.

	<b>Vice of Defect</b>	<b>Virtue</b>	<b>Vice of Excess</b>
<b>Parable of the Prodigal Son</b> <i>(Christian psychomachia)</i>	The Prodigal Son	The Father (God)	Tapsters and Prostitutes
<b>Morality Drama</b>	<i>Humanum Genus</i> or ‘everyman’	Personifications of Virtue	Personifications of Vice

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *The Ethiques of Aristotle*, trans. by John Wilkinson and Brunetto Latini (London: Richard Grafton, 1547), C1v.

<sup>7</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, *The First Book of Tullies Offices*, trans. by John Brinsley (London: H. Lownes, 1616), p. 127.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 126-127.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, C3v.

<b>Aristotelian Ethics*</b>	Prodigality	Liberality	Avarice
<b>Cicero's Magnanimity</b> (According to early modern translation quoted in text)	Fear, Cowardice, Stupidity, etc.	Nobility	Anger, Cruelty, Fierceness, Ambition, etc.

Table 1. Showing synergy between figures and concepts from the parable of the prodigal son, morality drama, and Aristotelian ethics. \*N.B. Prodigality is actually a vice of excess and Avarice a vice of defect, but this hardly precludes the overall schema.

Various scholars have convincingly argued that prodigal son dramas were used to define and condemn youths that failed to live up to patriarchal expectations.<sup>10</sup> Full admittance into society, as well as adult maturity, was achieved by proving oneself worthy of the status of householder, and so many early modern plays depict prodigal figures who find redemption not through paternal forgiveness, but through marriage to a virtuous woman, an event ‘that both stabilizes them and redeems their excesses’.<sup>11</sup>

A number of characters from early modern comedy appear to offer this evolved version of the prodigal son stereotype, fitting the profile of immature and prodigal youth, cynically exploited by the cunning and criminal whilst they, ineptly, try to find a bride. Examples include Sir Andrew Aguecheek from *Twelfth Night*, Bartholomew Cokes from *Bartholomew Fair*, and Lucio from *Love's Cure, or The Marital Maid*. Bergetto, I believe, represents one of the last representatives of this ‘Effeminate Prodigal’ stock-character. Distinguishing features include: being away from home or father absent (Bergetto, Aguecheek, Cokes, and Lucio); being mentored or governed by an older patriarchal figure who displays ambition, violent tendencies, or desire to exploit them (Bergetto, Aguecheek, Cokes, and Lucio); living riotously, with emphasis placed on immaturity or effeminacy (Bergetto, Aguecheek, Cokes, and Lucio); being physically uncoordinated (Bergetto, Aguecheek and Lucio); demonstrating cowardice (Bergetto, Aguecheek, and Lucio); sexual naivety (Bergetto, Aguecheek, Cokes, and Lucio); attracting masculine contempt and violence (Bergetto, Aguecheek, Cokes, and Lucio); being portrayed as desperately immature and/or effeminate (Bergetto, Aguecheek,

<sup>10</sup> See for example Ineke Murakami, *Moral Play and Counterpublic: Transformations in Moral Drama, 1465-1599* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 48-49; Dorothy H. Brown, *Christian Humanism in the Late English Morality Plays* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1999), pp. 127-29.

<sup>11</sup> Michael O’Connell, ‘The Jacobean Prodigals’, in *Essays in Memory of Richard Helgerson: Laureations*, ed. by Roze Hentschell and Kathy Lavezzo (Plymouth, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2012), pp. 227-242 (p. 231).

Cokes, and Lucio); and achieving, or almost achieving, masculine maturity through the love of a virtuous woman (Bergetto, and Lucio).

That Bergetto is the only one of these characters to blunder into a tragedy, and the only one to have his journey cut short, suggests a deliberate manipulation of the allegorical allusion for dramatic effect. Bergetto's immaturity, foolishness, and harmlessness are stressed in order to gain the audience's empathy and support, but his allegorical identity provides him with a spiritual mission and gravitas, which, when brutally denied, intensifies the pathos and shock of his unexpected murder. As the prodigal son, Bergetto represents humanity's hope for redemption, and so his failure and premature death devastatingly implies that mankind has grown too debased to be saved. The importance of Bergetto's death in the overall structure of the play can be considered via Freytag's pyramid. Freytag claimed that the first half of a play provides a period of 'Rising Movement' in which 'the action has been started; the chief persons have shown what they are; the interest has been awakened'.<sup>12</sup> At roughly mid-point the 'Climax' or crisis occurs, an event that directly affects the power of the ending: 'the more powerful the climax, the more violent the downfall of the hero'.<sup>13</sup> Bergetto's death, the first of many murders, can be seen as such a moment, terminating the play's only hint of comic relief, revealing the depth of social depravity, and initiating an unremittingly bleak and vicious second half that ends in a blood bath. Although the cruelty meted out is, largely, that of men against women, the division of virtue and vice along gender lines is a little too simplistic. Rather, with the exception of Bergetto, his servant Poggio, and Philotis, the woman who almost becomes his wife, every character in the play is, to some extent, guilty of the vice of excess. Hence Ford's critique takes aim at society as a whole, and Bergetto plays a key role in revealing not only the extent of iniquity, but also the spiritual despair that must follow. This pessimistic view of fallen humanity was a common trope, and often expressed by reference to Ovid's 'Four Ages' of man.<sup>14</sup> The 'Iron Age', the last and most degenerate, was depicted as an era of horror, void of mercy or hope, and it is significant that this era is explicitly invoked in regards to Bergetto's murder.

Bergetto is therefore something of a paradox. On a literal level he embodies inconsequential, immature foolishness, but his allegorical identity is implicitly related to

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<sup>12</sup> Freytag's *Technique of the Drama*, ed. by Elias J. MacEwan (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1900), p. 125.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pp. 128 and 135.

<sup>14</sup> Dennis James Siler, *The Influence of the Roman Poet Ovid on Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream': Intertextual Parallels and Meta-Ovidian Tendencies* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011), p. 3.

matters of deep spiritual significance, most especially the possibility of corrupt humanity finding divine redemption. Unfortunately, ‘implicit allegory’, such as Northrop Frye describes as being prevalent at this time, is inherently ephemeral, and the modern need for empirical logic denies us the ready and fluid acceptance of multiple interpretations of a single text, so characteristic of the medieval and early modern mind-set.<sup>15</sup> Present-day readers and audience members, generally unfamiliar with biblical and classical texts and trained to seek clarity, are culturally ill-equipped to recognise the sub-narrative content that contemporary audiences, raised on biblical narrative and educated in allegoresis would have readily observed.<sup>16</sup> As the vast majority of drama produced in this period invites either sustained or intermittent allegorical interpretation, this intellectual gap poses the danger that such works are sadly abridged. Of course, searching for allegory within every phrase creates the alternative hazard that meaning may be found where it was not intended, but awareness of textual potentiality should, I believe, be maintained nevertheless, as reading with ‘wit and fancy’, or as we would say ‘intellect and imagination’, was demanded by the contemporary obsession with figurative language and layers of meaning.<sup>17</sup> The best guide may simply be how well a literal reading of a play ‘works’, because if it does not work well the fault may be in our reading rather than in the dramatist’s writing, though such a crude approach may be of little help in interpreting sophisticated texts.<sup>18</sup> Bergetto possibly offers a fine example. In the past, critics and directors have naturally focussed on Bergetto’s literal aspect. His childish antics, incongruent in the Machiavellian Parma portrayed, have been derided as an unnecessary distraction from the play’s proper business of sexual intrigue and casual murder, and in consequence the character has largely been ignored by critics and dropped by directors.<sup>19</sup> Larry Champion for example describes Bergetto as ‘too stupid to develop into much more than a buffoon’, before going on to acknowledge that ‘the fop [Bergetto] is at least incapable of hypocrisy’.<sup>20</sup> This moral distinction is surely

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<sup>15</sup> *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 90–91; Natalie Crohn Schmitt, ‘The Idea of a Person in Medieval Morality Plays’, *Comparative Drama*, 12.1 (1978), 23–34 (p. 25).

<sup>16</sup> Alan C. Dessen, ‘Middleton’s *The Phoenix* and the Allegorical Tradition’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 6.2 (1966), 291–308 (p. 308); Judith Dundas, ‘Allegory as a Form of Wit’, *Studies in the Renaissance*, 11 (1964), 223–33 (p. 233).

<sup>17</sup> Dundas, p. 233.

<sup>18</sup> Those interested might like to read my article on Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl*; see Julian Real, ‘*The Roaring Girl* and Astrea: In Search of a Lost Allegory’, *Parergon*, 33.1 (2016), 131–58.

<sup>19</sup> Bergetto is dropped from Griffi’s 1971 film adaptation for example. See, *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*. Dir. Giuseppe Patroni Griffi. Espectáculos Rivus International Coproductions, 1971.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* and the Jacobean Tragic Perspective’, *PMLA*, 90.1 (1975), 78–87 (pp. 82–83) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/461350>>.

significant, especially in ‘a place filled with reprehensible and violent individuals who dissemble and torture fellow townspeople – mostly women – and usually get away with it’.<sup>21</sup> Lisa Hopkins has noted that Bergetto’s death is a pivotal event that holds similarities to Mercutio’s death in *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>22</sup> However, in contrast to Mercutio’s death, Bergetto’s murder does not set in motion a chain of revenge killings that spiral out of control, indeed his murderer escapes justice entirely thanks to the systemic corruption of the city. Bergetto simply disappears from the plot, along with his servant and fiancée. His unique moral status coupled with the odd lack of consequence for his murder raises intriguing questions: *why* does Bergetto feature in this play, and *why* does his demise matter at all? I suggest that the answer lies in Bergetto’s allegorical identity as the prodigal son, a pervasive stereotype of the period, which would have created the expectation of a morally affirming conclusion. By subverting this dominant narrative, murdering the prodigal son, Ford demands that Parma, and society in general, be viewed in the harshest moral and ethical terms. Ford’s brilliantly cynical use of the parable and its tradition creates a damning social critique that can only be appreciated if Bergetto’s allegorical identity is recognised. Without this, he becomes merely a fool in a tragedy, his contribution ‘totally beside the point’, and the play intellectually castrated.<sup>23</sup>

### **Bergetto as an Effeminate Prodigal Son**

Bergetto’s immaturity and effeminacy are advertised by derogatory comments made about him when he first appears on stage. Two gossiping women introduce him to the audience by describing him as, a ‘brave old ape in a silken coat’ (1.2.97–98).<sup>24</sup> The exact meaning of this phrase is somewhat cryptic, though the disparagement is clear enough, and whilst Lomax suggests that the phrase is proverbial, she offers no further elucidation.<sup>25</sup> In contemporary vernacular, to ‘ape’ meant to ‘imitate’ or ‘mimic’, and was frequently used to describe children or foolish people who were ‘unreasoning’ and

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<sup>21</sup> Corinne S. Abate, ‘New Directions: Identifying the Real Whore of Parma’, in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Lisa Hopkins (London: Continuum, 2015), pp. 94–113 (p. 109).

<sup>22</sup> ‘Introduction’, in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore: A Critical Guide* (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 1–13 (p. 3).

<sup>23</sup> Emily C. Bartels, ‘*'Tis Pity She's a Whore: The Play of Intertextuality*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Tragedy*, ed. by Emma Smith and Garrett A. Sullivan Jr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 249–60 (p. 256).

<sup>24</sup> All *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* quotations from *John Ford: 'Tis Pity She's a Whore and Other Plays*, ed. by Marion Lomax (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) pp. 167–239.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Editor’s Notes’, in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 344–356 (p. 346).

‘imitative’.<sup>26</sup> The phrase ‘old ape’ could therefore imply an old-child, a man-child. The silken coat he is described as wearing suggests that Bergetto’s outer appearance hides an inner base quality. The phrase may derive from the story ‘Of the King and the Apes’, which appears in *Aesop’s Fables*, and whose moral stresses that clothes and imitation cannot hide true nature:

A Certain king of Aegypt appointed some Aapz, that they should thorowly laern the order of-dancing. For as no baest goeth naerer the favor of men, so doth not any other baest folow manz dooingz, either better, or wilinger. Thae-for being taught the skil of-dancing forth-with, they began to dance being appareled with notable purpl, and waering visors, and the sight plaezed a graet tym mor and mor until a certain plaezant one of the beholdorz cast-out nutz, into the middl’ of the place, which he caried privily in his bozom. Thae the aapz by-and-by, az soon az they had sen the nutz, forgeting the danc, began to be that that they waer before, and sodenly returned from dancorz into aapz agein, and their vizorz being spoiled, and their garmentz being torn-of, they fouht among them-selvz for the nutz, not with-out very graet laughing of the beholdorz.

The Moral: This fabl warneth, that the dekingz of fortun chang not the nature of a man.<sup>27</sup>

Bergetto’s first words appear to support the allusion: ‘Didst thou think, Poggio, that I would spoil my new clothes and leave my dinner, to fight?’ (1.2.99–100). Educated audience members would have been thoroughly conversant with Aesop, whose fables were extremely popular and used as a standard school text.<sup>28</sup> If Bergetto is being compared to Aesop’s dancing apes, then his masculine maturity is being utterly derided: he is not a man but an unreasoning animal masquerading as a man, a child whose false

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Ape, v’, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press)

<<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.otago.ac.nz/view/Entry/9057>> [accessed 15 June 2015];

‘Apish, Adj’, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press)

<<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.otago.ac.nz/view/Entry/9201>> [accessed 15 June 2015].

A famous comparison between apes and children is found in *Richard III*. The young Duke of York describing himself as ‘little, like an ape’ (3.1.130). All Shakespeare quotations from *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Orgel and A. R. Braunmuller (New York: Penguin Group, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Aesop., *Aesops Fables in Tru Ortography with Grammar-Notz*, trans. by William Bullokar (London: Edmund Bollifant, 1585), pp. 118–19. The unusual spelling in this passage is due to the translator, William Bullokar’s, desire to familiarise his young readers with phonetics and linguistics.

<sup>28</sup> Ian Green, *Humanism and Protestantism in Early Modern English Education* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), p. 163.

mantle of maturity will slip at the first childish novelty, a figure whose only value is to amuse his betters until they grow tired of the game.

In conversation with Poggio, Bergetto quickly confirms his prodigal nature by describing himself as an ‘elder brother’, and therefore immune from the title of ‘coxcomb’ (1.2.103). The comment appears to make reference to the parable of the prodigal son, but is ironically inverted to correspond to the contemporary primogeniture system. This custom saw elder sons as the sole inheritor, and so they rather than younger sons were seen as potentially prodigal, the ‘errant behaviour’ of elder siblings a topical concern that created pressure for inheritance reform.<sup>29</sup> Despite the transference of the prodigal label from the younger to the elder son, the causative factor of youth and immaturity is retained, and certainly features strongly in Bergetto’s character. His stated belief that money and title could prevent social criticism is exactly the sort of foolishness that such censure was aimed at, the definition of a coxcomb being ‘a foolish, conceited, showy person’, the gulling of whom was a standard theme in literature, broadsheet, and playhouse.<sup>30</sup> Bergetto’s imprudent profligacy is typical of such characters, and his thoughtless materialism – arguing that a ‘handful of silver [can] buy a headful of wit’ (1.2.107), and stated intention to ‘purchase’ the noble Annabella to be his wife (1.2.108) – demonstrates conformance to the prodigal stereotype. Bergetto also reveals other stereotypical traits associated with immaturity and effeminacy: vanity and inadequate physical ability. Telling Poggio to ‘mark my pace’, he then, according to stage directions, ‘walks affectedly’ up and down the stage (1.2.110). Poggio describes this performance in an aside, ‘I have seen an ass and a mule trot the Spanish pavin with a better grace, I know not how often’ (1.2.111–12). In an age when the display of effortless physical skill was the mark of a gentleman, Bergetto is unable to so much as walk without looking like an ass.

### **Effeminate Prodigals and Natural Fool Clowns**

The physical comedy that this display would have provided, reminiscent of Aguecheek’s caper, Cokes’ chasing after fruit, and Lucio’s attempts to learn fencing, coupled with his foolish indiscretions, safely establishes Bergetto as the clown of the

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<sup>29</sup> Michelle M. Dowd, *The Dynamics of Inheritance on the Shakespearean Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 117-18. The most famous early modern prodigal son type character, Shakespeare’s Prince Hal, was, of course, also an eldest son. Consider also the behaviour of Oliver in *As You Like It*.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Coxcomb, N’, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press)

<<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.otago.ac.nz/view/Entry/43530>> [accessed 16 June 2015].



play. In *The English Clown Tradition from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare*, Robert Hornback describes the distinct differences between the two types of clown that appeared in early modern drama: the artificial and natural fool. Whereas the artificial fool distinguished himself with a biting satirical wit, the natural fool was an ‘innocent’ who was laughed at for his ‘mental deficiencies’; the artificial fool was ‘consistently bitter’, whilst the natural fool was ‘helplessly dependent... sweet and pathetic’; the artificial fool was ‘artful’, whilst the natural was ‘nonsensical’; the artificial fool was, like Feste in *Twelfth Night*, ‘wise enough to play the fool’ (3.1.59), the natural fool utterly lacking in ‘self-knowledge;’ finally, whereas the artificial fool deliberately flouted social convention to expose conceit, the natural fool was an ‘unconsciously transgressive social deviant’.<sup>31</sup> Hornback’s model suggests that Effeminate Prodigal characters, who stereotypically display innocence, pathetic helplessness, lack of self-awareness, and transgression in spades, would have fulfilled the role of natural fool clowns.

Bergetto certainly adds some much-needed comic relief to the play, but it is interesting to consider that his folly perhaps generates more than mere condescension; the laughter he prompts conceivably creating an emotional bond with the audience. In the 2014 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, an innovative interpretation of Dogberry, another natural fool that audiences love to laugh at, transformed him almost magically from a figure of derision into a focus of remarkable poignancy. Set immediately after the First World War, the play’s historical context allowed Nick Haverson, the actor playing Dogberry, to imply that his absurdities were the result of battle shock, a take on the character that instantly silenced the audience’s laughter. In the words of one reviewer, ‘With the smallest of changes, Dogberry suddenly became a tragic character that broke my heart in a way that I have never experienced in a *Much Ado* production before (and I have seen a lot of them)’.<sup>32</sup> The unexpected pathos created by Dogberry’s post-traumatic stress disorder is, I suggest, akin to that which follows from Bergetto’s unexpected murder. Both cases create a strong emotional response because audiences naturally dislike, and do not expect, bad things to happen to characters that they laugh at and are fond of. Ford appears to have been well aware of this psychological effect. He exploits Bergetto’s comedic nonsense in order to gain the audience’s support and empathy, before making him the victim of a

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Hornback, *The English Clown Tradition from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2009), pp. 150–1.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Theatre Review: *Much Ado About Nothing* (RSC, 2014)’

<<http://www.thenarratologist.com/miscellaneous/theatre-review-much-ado-nothing-rsc-2014/>> [accessed 5 November 2015].

gruesome murder that shocks the audience, and thereby highlights the depravity of the imagined society.<sup>33</sup>

The sense of injustice that Bergetto's death elicits is largely attributable to his innocence and harmlessness; a point Ford stresses through frequent comparison between Bergetto and that most vulnerable of all creatures, a baby (1.2.101; 1.3.46; 3.1.1). His essentially benign nature is encapsulated by Donado's sad obituary: 'he meant no man harm, / That I am sure of' (3.98–9). The inherent connection between Bergetto's prodigality and childishness also raises the cultural ambiguity that lay behind the early modern concept of youth, and which defined it as a period of transformation and becoming. The following is from a character literature passage that describes 'a Young Man:'

Hee is now out of Natures protection, though not yet able to guide himselfe:  
But left loose to the World, and Fortune, from which the weakenesse of his  
Childhood preserv'd him: and now his strength exposes him. Hee is indeed  
just of age to bee miserable, yet in his owne conceit first begins to bee happy;  
and hee is happier in this imagination, and his misery not felt is lesse. He sees  
yet but the outside of the World and Men, and conceives them according to  
their appearing glister, and out of this ignorance beleeves them. Hee pursues  
all vanities for happinesse, and enjoyes them best in this fancy. His reason  
serves not to curbe, but understand his appetite, and prosecute the motions  
thereof with a more eager earnestness. Himselfe is his owne temptation, and  
needs not Satan, and the World will come hereafter. Hee leaves repentance  
for gray hayres, and performes it in beeing covetous. Hee is mingled with the  
vices of the age as the fashion and custome, with which hee longs to bee  
acquainted; and Sinnes to better his understanding. He conceives his Youth as  
the season of his Lust, and the Houre wherein hee ought to bee bad: and  
because he would not lose his time, spends it. He distasts Religion as a sad  
thing, and is sixe yeeres elder for a thought of Heaven. Hee scornes and  
feares, and yet hopes for old age, but dare not imagine it with wrinkles. He  
loves and hates with the same inflammation: and when the heat is over, is coole  
alike to friends and enemies. His friendship is seldome so stedfast, but that  
lust, drinke, or anger may overturne it. He offers you his blood to day in

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<sup>33</sup> The scene is reminiscent of Polonius' death, an event that also marks a point of no return and that begins a spiral of death and tragedy. However, though the audience may regret Polonius' murder, the emotional effect is subdued because his age, constant interference, and attempts to manipulate others reduces his innocence and makes him, to some extent, deserving of his fate: 'Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger' (*Hamlet* 3.4.33). Similarly, Mercutio's death in *Romeo and Juliet* also creates a sense of loss and instigates a cycle of death, but Mercutio, even more than Polonius, brings his fate upon himself.

kindnesse, and is readie to take yours tomorrow. He do's seldome any thing which hee wishes not to doe againe, and is onely wise after a misfortune. *Hee suffers much for his knowledge, and a great deale of folly it is makes him a wise man.* He is free from many Vices, by being not grown to the performance, and is onely more virtuous out of weakenesse. Every action is his danger, & every man his ambush. Hee is a Shippe without Pilot or Tackling, and only good fortune may steere him. *If hee scape this age, hee ha's scap't a Tempest, and may live to be a Man.*<sup>34</sup>

The description, provided in full, is packed with a nostalgic sentimentality that makes explicit the alterity of youth, and yet excuses its dissipations as an unavoidable part of maturation. Youthful folly was traditionally equated with the prodigal son's period of excess, a sentiment well captured in the above passage and condensed into the single sentence, 'Hee suffers much for his knowledge, and a great deal of folly it is makes him a wise man'. All men had to pass through this metamorphic stage, and so it was impossible to condemn (too severely) those undergoing it. Even national heroes and models of heroic masculinity, such as Henry V, were liable to be shown as the product of a successfully negotiated prodigal youth. Marriage, as mentioned, was the recognised way to achieve masculine maturity, and because Bergetto is about to marry, about to escape the 'Tempest, and . . . [become] a Man' when he is murdered, his death seems especially poignant.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Vice of Defect, the Vice of Excess, and the Iron Age**

The frequent use of the parable of the prodigal son to justify youthful folly extenuated the spiritual aspects into the temporal world, and so marriage could be equated with Christian redemption.<sup>36</sup> Bergetto's murder therefore holds spiritual ramifications that are largely lost upon a modern audience, but which would have made his murder seem far crueller when first performed. His death, just prior to marriage, just prior to *redemption*, holds similarities to the murder of Hamlet's father, who describes in stark terms the outcome of death without spiritual forgiveness:

Cut off in the blossoms of my sin,

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<sup>34</sup> John Earle, *Micro-Cosmographie, Or, A Peece of the World Discovered in Essayes and Characters*. (London: Robert Allot, 1629), sec. 25.

<sup>35</sup> In regard to the importance of marriage it is worth considering the last act of *Henry V* – despite his martial victories Hal still needs to marry to seal his transformation into King Henry.

<sup>36</sup> O'Connell, p. 231.

Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneneled,  
No reck'ning made, but sent to my account  
With all my imperfections on my head.  
O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible! (1.5.76–80).

For King Hamlet the consequence is a period in purgatory, 'Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purged away' (1.5.12–13). Bergetto, however, in accordance with Protestant doctrine, could be denied even this reprieve, and thus be eternally damned. Such an outcome is possibly implicit in his dying speech as he bemoans, 'I am going the wrong way sure' (3.7.30–1).

Bergetto's death therefore plays a vital role in setting the desolate spiritual and ethical tone of the overall drama, denying Bergetto, and thus all humanity via his pseudo-identity as the prodigal son, the possibility of redemption. In accordance with the *psychomachia* and golden mean, Effeminate Prodigal characters are typically paired with contrasting figures of angry excess, their vice of immaturity shown as less than virtuous but nevertheless closer to virtue than the licentious bestiality of their counterpart. In *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, Bergetto has no immediate foil, but is instead contrasted against the rest of the entire cast, a structure that establishes the dramatized society as overwhelmingly malevolent. The headstrong depravity of the protagonist, Giovanni, leads to incest and the murder of his sister and unborn child. Donado, Richardetto, and Florio, the patriarchal guardians of the 'children', Bergetto, Philotis, and Giovanni and Annabella respectively, all use their authority to exploit their children; Soranzo, Annabella's eventual husband, is a heartless fornicator who later decides to murder her and her brother, Giovanni, when he discovers her pregnancy; his servant, Vasques, willingly serves Soranzo's corrupt ends, independently deciding to poison his deranged ex-mistress, Hippolita, and blind Annabella's maid, Putana; Grimaldi, jealous of Soranzo's romantic success with Annabella, decides to assassinate him, but accidentally kills Bergetto. Religious figures offer no better example: the Friar advocates fornication as preferable to incest, thereby 'substituting one form of illicit sexuality for another', and heartily approves of Hippolita's murder as an instance of 'wonderful justice', stating 'Heaven, thou art righteous' (4.1.86-7); the Cardinal meanwhile protects the murderer Grimaldi for political advantage, sentences Putana to death by burning, though she has committed no crime, and confiscates the riches of the dead for the 'Church'.<sup>37</sup> Though the women suffer the men's violence they are hardly free from sin: Annabella commits incest; her maid, Putana, is complicit in the crime;

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<sup>37</sup> Susannah B. Mintz, 'The Power of "Parity" in Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 102.2 (2003), 269–91 (p. 275).

Hippolita commits adultery and, after having been jilted by her lover Soranzo, contracts Vasques to poison him, but is double-crossed and poisoned herself.<sup>38</sup>

The almost total destruction of the women in the play seems to stem from a gendered view of vice. The men's vice of excess results in predominantly violent outcomes, but female virtue centred upon 'sexual probity', and so the feminine excess of vice naturally results in promiscuity and sexual deviance.<sup>39</sup> The play certainly supports such an understanding, most of the women indulging in one form or another of sexual misbehaviour.<sup>40</sup> Both groups are immoral, but the women are unable to defend themselves against the men's violence, a view that reflects humoral theory's opinion of men as active and women as passive. The triumph of masculine cruelty however, is ultimately assured by patriarchal prejudice: male violence is tolerated and condoned, whereas female sexual licence is condemned and excessively punished. Thus Grimaldi, Bergetto's murderer, goes free, whilst Putana, largely innocent and already blinded, is ordered to be burnt alive 'for example's sake' (5.6.131). The play therefore contains an inherent criticism of societal values, but whilst Mintz sees this as a critique of patriarchy alone, the immorality of the women demands a broader view.<sup>41</sup> Ford is condemning not just male violence and the patriarchal oppression of women, though this is certainly present, but all of a society in which 'it is demonstrably impossible to live uncorrupted'.<sup>42</sup>

As the allegorical representative of the prodigal son, a certain burden of spiritual guilt should rightfully rest upon Bergetto's shoulders, but the far worse immorality of those around him makes him appear almost virtuous by comparison, and certainly innocent. Thus, the play exaggerates the corruption of society by elevating the moral status of the archetype of human vice to that of guiltless child. That Parmesan society, rather than

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<sup>38</sup> Readers will note that Poggio and Philotis are missing from the list. Both are somewhat two-dimensional and both disappear after Bergetto's death. Philotis, significantly, retiring to a convent to take up 'chaste vows' and thus emphasising her virtue (4.2.30). Her role in the play is interesting in that although she obeys her uncle, and goes along with his cynical plan to marry Bergetto for advancement, she is nevertheless portrayed as kind and sincere. As such, she accords with the Machiavellian society Ford portrays, yet also provides a figure of virtuous womanhood, and can therefore offer Bergetto the chance of redemption.

<sup>39</sup> Garthine Walker, 'Expanding the Boundaries of Female Honour in Early Modern England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 (1996), 235–245 (p. 235).

<sup>40</sup> Ford's choice of name for the maid, 'Putana', cleverly allows him to imply her immorality without the need for another subplot.

<sup>41</sup> Mintz, p. 272.

<sup>42</sup> Vera Foster, '*'Tis Pity She's a Whore as City Tragedy'*, in *John Ford: Critical Re-Visions*, ed. by Michael Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 181–200 (p. 193).

any one individual character, is depicted as wholly corrupt, implies the depths of degeneracy that humanity has sunk to. This was a common stance that accorded with the ‘Protestant conviction’ that humanity had become ‘utterly sinful’ when it fell from grace.<sup>43</sup> This paradigm was frequently raised through reference to ‘The Four Ages of Man’, a tale contained within Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a work of immense influence.<sup>44</sup> The story describes man’s degeneration, from an Eden-like idyll, the Golden Age, through the Silver and Bronze Ages to the depraved Iron Age, an era that includes all of recorded history up to and including the present day. This epoch was defined by the triumph of evil and the absence of virtue:

Men live by ravine and by stealth: the wandring guest doth stand  
 In danger of his host: the host in danger of his guest:  
 And fathers of their sonnes in lawe: yea seldome time doth rest  
 Betweene borne brothers such accord and love as ought to be,  
 The good-man seekes the good-wives death, and his againe seekes she.  
 With grislie poison step-dames fell their husbands sonnes assaile.  
 The sonne enquires afore hand when his fathers life shal faile,  
 All godlinesse lies under foote. And Ladie Astrey [the Greek goddess of  
 Justice] last  
 Of heavenlie vertues from this earth in slaughter drowned past [passed].<sup>45</sup>

The above passage is taken from Arthur Golding’s famous translation of *The Metamorphoses*, the only English translation available between 1567 and 1626, and which was read by the likes of William Shakespeare and Edmund Spenser.<sup>46</sup> In his ‘Epistle’, Golding syncretically compares Ovid’s idyllic age, the Golden Age, with Eden, and the fall with current woes, ‘Moreover by the golden age what other thing is ment, / Than Adams time in Paradise, who being innocent, / Did lead a blest and happy life, until that thorough sin / He fell from God: from which time forth all sorrow did begin’.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Doreen Margaret Rosman, *From Catholic to Protestant: Religion and the People in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: UCL Press, 1996), p. 56.

<sup>44</sup> Siler, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> Ovid, *The Xv Bookes of P. Ovidius Naso, Entitled, Metamorphosis*, trans. by Arthur Golding (London: Robert Waldegrave, 1587), p. 6.

<sup>46</sup> John Frederick Nims, ‘Introduction’, in *Ovid’s ‘Metamorphoses’: The Arthur Golding Translation, 1567* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2000), pp. xiii–xxxv (p. xiv).

<sup>47</sup> ‘The Epistle’, in *The Xv Bookes of P. Ovidius Naso, Entitled, Metamorphosis* (London: Robert Waldegrave, 1587), p. A2r–A8v (p. A7r).

This association lies at the heart of Ford's play, the connection between his dramatized Parma and Ovid's 'Four Ages' made explicit by reference to the most iconic aspect of the Iron Age, the desertion of the goddess of Justice, Astraea, (whom Golding refers to as 'Ladie Astrey' in the passage above). After Bergetto's murder, Donado chases the assassin, Grimaldi, to the Cardinal's palace where he has taken refuge. Brought before the Cardinal, he frankly confesses his crime, but the Cardinal finds that his nobility exonerates the murder and grants him the Church's protection (3.9.54). In shock, Donado can only ask, 'Is this a churchman's voice? Dwells justice here?' (3.9.61). A friend replies, 'Justice is fled to heaven and comes no nearer' (3.9.62). Thus Bergetto's murder is used to highlight the extent of societal corruption, and unambiguously connected to a vision in which the triumph of Vice has literally banished Virtue from the face of the Earth. The link is perhaps small, but Ovid's tale was so integral to the early modern world-view that a contemporary audience would hardly have needed even this signpost to connect Ford's play to the immorality of the Iron Age, the era of absolute moral decay, the era in which innocence could not survive.<sup>48</sup>

This reading is supported by Ford's prose work. His only books, *The Golden Meane* (1613) and *A Line of Life* (1620), both focus upon the difficulties of living a virtuous life in a corrupt world, a world that he also casts in Ovidian terms, defining it with the ancient proverb, attributed to Plautus – '*homo homini lupus*' – 'man is a beast to man'.<sup>49</sup> In *The Line of Life* he argues that the virtuous individual is a man apart: 'what can one *private man* do against such a multitude of temptations? Either hee must consent to doe as they doe; or dissent and hate them: if consent, hee is mischievous with many; if dissent, vertuous by himselfe'.<sup>50</sup> This thinking is reinforced a few pages later, '*Vanity* most commonly rides coach't in the highway, the beaten way, the common way; But *Vertue and Moderation* walkes alone'.<sup>51</sup> Bergetto is hardly a model of virtue, but his vice of defect at least allows him to resemble virtue in so far as he does no harm, an aspect that uniquely sets him apart from society. Ford's truly virtuous man is carefully described:

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<sup>48</sup> The cultural dominance of Ovid in the early modern period would be difficult to over-emphasise. Eighty per cent of Shakespeare's mythological references are taken from his work, the vast majority from the *Metamorphoses*; see Siler, 3. Shakespeare also makes pointed reference to Astraea in order to paint a dismal picture of society: '*Terras Astraea reliquit* [Astraea has left the earth] / Be you remembered, Marcus. She's gone, she's fled' (*Titus Andronicus* 4.3.4–4).

<sup>49</sup> John Ford, *A Line of Life Pointing at the Immortalitie of a Vertuous Name*. (London: William Stansby, 1620), p. 26.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 36.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 38.

The minde of a Wise and Noble man is such, that what or how many gusts and tides of adversity assault him, they may at all times rather arme, then at any time oppresse him, since his resolution cannot overflow with the rudenesse of passion; for that his excellent and refyned temperature will ever retaine the salt of judgement and moderation; the one proving a *Wise*, the other a *Noble* man.<sup>52</sup>

The possession of such attributes was always unstable and threatened by the self, ‘on the one side are theeves, even our affections to spoile us of vertue; there on the other side Beasts, which are defects of reason, set on to devoure us’.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the focus on the social elite in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, he sees such weakness as most common amongst the upper classes: ‘an exact Courtier is seldome a good man; for not to speake of generall enormities in particular; Courtiers are most times given over to those two wonderful madneses *Pride* and *Riot*, *Pride* countenancing their *Riot*, and *RIOT* making glorious their *Pride*’.<sup>54</sup> Inadequate and effeminate men are also described, significantly labelled ‘unworthy *Court-Ape[s]*’ and ‘*golden calfe[s]*’<sup>55</sup> – phrases practically identical to those used to define Bergetto: ‘brave old ape in a silken coat’ (1.2.97–98) and ‘golden calf’ (1.2.116). Ford’s discussion of the golden mean also appears to borrow from the parable of the prodigal son: ‘reformation of folly is a worke of more praise then the working of folly is a cause of disgrace’, and, ‘extremity is a singular teacher to learne us that we are men’.<sup>56</sup> In *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, Ford maintains this view of the ‘virtuous’ individual struggling against an overwhelming tide of iniquity, the futility of which is emphasised by Bergetto’s death *en route* to his wedding. The prodigal’s near attainment of virtue perhaps ensuring his destruction: spiritual redemption, by definition, being impossible in the Iron Age.<sup>57</sup> Bergetto, a stereotypical representative of human folly and vice, is therefore manipulated to expose the manifold depravities of society as far greater than his own. In effect, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* partially dramatizes the popular images and tales of the prodigal son amongst the courtesans and thieves, but the innovative step of having the dissolute murder the prodigal, especially one so childish and defenceless, transforms the narrative from one

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<sup>52</sup> *The Golden Meane* (London: H. Lownes, 1613), pp. 5–6.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p. 31.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p. 61.

<sup>55</sup> *A Line of Life*, pp. 70 & 71.

<sup>56</sup> *The Golden Meane*, pp. 82 & 85.

<sup>57</sup> Annabella, provides an interesting parallel. After committing incest and becoming pregnant to her brother, she freely repents and is overheard by a friar who calls her confession ‘music to the soul’ (5.1.30). However, once ‘Heaven hath heard [her]’ (5.1.37) and she finds redemption, Annabella appears to recognise that death must follow: ‘Thanks to the Heavens, who have prolonged my breath / To this good use. Now I can welcome death’ (5.1.57–58).



of hope and eventual salvation to a vision of desolation and bleak despair.

Much of the power of the play can be attributed to this destabilization of the prodigal son stereotype. The emphasis placed on Bergetto's childish nature makes him likeable, vulnerable, and appealing; a child in a man's body, someone fascinated by rumours of a two-headed horse and who cries as he is beaten in the street.<sup>58</sup> His death scene is, in my opinion, one of the most emotive and powerful in all of early modern drama, superbly capturing his confusion, conveying his agony, and evoking a sense of utter waste:

Bergetto: O help, help! Here's a stitch fallen in my guts. O for a flesh tailor quickly! — Poggio!

Philotis: What ails my love?

Bergetto: I am sure I cannot piss forward and backward, and yet I am wet before and behind. Lights, lights, ho, lights!

....

Bergetto: O, my belly seeths like porridge-pot: some cold water, I shall boil over else. My whole body is in a sweat, that you may wring my shirt; feel here — why, Poggio!

....

Bergetto: Is this all mine own blood? Nay then good-night, with me. Poggio, commend me to my uncle, dost hear? Bid him, for my sake, make much of this wench. O — I am going the wrong way sure, my belly aches so. — O, farewell, Poggio! —O! —O!—

*Dies* (3.7.9–32)

The maturity that Bergetto so nearly achieves is perhaps discernible in his dying speech. Beginning with childish terms and jests about incontinence, Bergetto finds dignity as he grows closer to death. His last thoughts are for his dependents, Philotis and Poggio, and for his soul. Whether Ford intended the scene to indicate a budding masculine maturity is impossible to say. Possibly Bergetto begins to transform after he first meets Philotis, suggested by the fact that he disobeys his uncle to spend time with her, and says, 'Does my uncle think to make me a baby still? No, Poggio, he shall know I have sponce now' (3.1.1–2). Such textual hints are hardly an explicit indication of transformation; indeed, Bergetto's death is powerful largely because it portrays the murder of an innocent child. Nevertheless, it is interesting to consider that Ford may have intended these ambiguous hints to be recognised as a burgeoning maturity, growing stronger as Bergetto's

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<sup>58</sup> Foster, p. 194.

marriage, the recognised cure for prodigality, approached.

Ford's play is a fascinating work that manipulates the ambiguities encapsulated within Bergetto, child and man, fool and representative of all humanity, in order to emphasise the immorality of the contemporary world. Initially, Bergetto proves the very definition of a coxcomb: an immature gull and an arrogant coward with more money than sense. However, as the audience discovers his essential harmless nature, enjoys his comic idiocy, and perhaps recognises his potential to transform and achieve maturity/redemption, his contemptible status becomes less certain. His murder ultimately humanises Bergetto, a point demonstrated within the drama by his uncle Donado, who is moved to forget the fool he constantly berated, and lament instead the loss of the innocent child. Arguably the audience shares this sentiment, and Bergetto's murder scene remains remarkably moving still today. Occurring at Freytag's 'Point of Crisis', the event clearly serves as a turning point, an authoritative denial that the innocent can survive in a pervasively corrupt world. Ford appears to have been preoccupied with society's moral health, and the similarities between his pedagogical prose and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* suggests that the play was intended to provide a similar didactic message; the bestial society of Parma offering a syncretic union between the Iron Age and Protestant doctrine. This focus shifts the burden of spiritual guilt from Bergetto to the vice ridden figures of excess that surround him, and thus still extends a measure of redemption to the prodigal character. Nevertheless, a piteous and pointless death is a far cry from the joyous homecoming that the audience would have foreseen in Bergetto's future, and thus Ford's dark and cynical vision, that denies the possibility of virtue or the hope of achieving redemption in this fallen world, is driven home to the hilt.