1 Poet-dramatist in the Caroline Theatre

John Ford stands between two worlds in the theatre of his time. His uniqueness, which has stimulated so much commentary over the past fifty years, lies primarily in his response as an artist to that situation. In date, in manner and attitude, to some extent in the content of his surviving independent plays, he is clearly of the Caroline theatre, but his habit of presenting Caroline conceptions within a Jacobean pattern, his obvious attachment to a drama which most of his contemporaries would regard as outworn, have placed him to the modern view as ‘in every way a conclusion’,¹ — in effect the last of the Jacobean poet-dramatists.

Ford’s reputation is muddied with contradictory assumptions; Lamb’s admiration and the fair assessments of Joan Sargeaunt² and Una Ellis-Fermor³ have been countered by the opinions, often curiously prejudiced, of those who dismiss his work as part of the decadence,⁴ nor is the general impression of Ford as a dramatist any clearer for those who find in him an exponent either of Burtonian psychology⁵ or of the traditional moral order.⁶ A recent tendency to approach Ford’s plays as a matter for the study rather than the stage is an easy and totally misleading evasion of the problem. The cumulative effect has been to lend an air of elderliness and remoteness to one of the most enterprising and individual dramatists of the early seventeenth century theatre.

A partial explanation is that except in name nothing is known of Ford’s independent plays before he reached the age of forty. But another, and more important, is a general lack of interest in the nature and use of the Caroline stage. Most students of drama know a good deal about the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres; they know far less about those which functioned during the reign of Charles I. With our hindsight of what was to come we tend to regard both the stage and the drama of that period as a dead end, an appendage to the Jacobean era, providing temporary fare for an audience of tired interest and declining numbers.

D. M. Farr, John Ford and the Caroline Theatre
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Now while there is some truth in this conclusion it ignores the growing importance of the private theatres during the period and the impetus which the influence of the Sovereign and the Court was giving to new developments in drama—trends already felt in Jacobean years, for instance in Shakespeare’s last plays and in the early work of Beaumont and Fletcher at Blackfriars and the Globe. After many readings of Ford’s unaided plays I am convinced that they can be fully appreciated—in fact that we can know what Ford was about—only in the context of the two theatres for which they were intended. Five of the surviving independent plays were written for the Phoenix (earlier the Cockpit) in Drury Lane under Beeston’s management, and probably performed by Queen Henrietta’s Men, and two for the King’s Men at Blackfriars. As I try to show in succeeding chapters Ford seems to have thought and written with the shortcomings as well as the opportunities of his stage and his audience in mind, and this, considering his continuing association with one of the most important of the private theatres while maintaining an intermittent connection with the leading company of actors in London, suggests not the ‘armchair dramatist’ but the serious professional.

During the Caroline period the private—or rather enclosed, indoor—theatre became less the exception than the rule. Another tendency encouraged by the King and supported by the influence of the Queen and the Court was the exclusive use of the theatres for the performance of plays, instead of serving the dual purpose of popular entertainment such as cock-fighting, bear-baiting, fencing, as well as drama. The Blackfriars theatre in the old Blackfriars Priory and the Phoenix theatre in Drury Lane had both grown up in the Jacobean period. When in 1607/8 Henry Evans relinquished his lease for the Children’s companies of part of the Blackfriars buildings, the King’s Men took over the property with additional rooms as winter quarters which they retained until the closure of the theatres in 1642. But the Phoenix had been a good example of the dual-purpose theatre, for it was a reconstruction of the old Cockpit, now owned by Christopher Beeston, a colleague of Shakespeare. In 1616 Beeston converted the Cockpit into a private theatre, exclusively for stage plays, and renamed it the ‘Phoenix’, although it continued to be