7. SHAKESPEARE 2 - THE CRIME AGAINST VENUS

The history of Western civilization can be written as the story of the disastrous consequences of dualism. Dualism began in the ancient world as a philosophical and religious idea which gradually filtered into general consciousness and into language to the point where, from the Renaissance onwards, it became almost impossible for educated Europeans to think in any but a dualistic way. Dualism is the belief that everything in life can be divided into two opposing principles or constituents; but basically that matter and spirit are independent entities yoked together in life in violation of the essential nature of each. About two thousand five hundred years ago, a remarkable change took place in man's concept of the gods, the movement towards monotheism, a single male godhead existing independently of the created universe as pure spirit. In its most extreme form this leads to the universal dichotomy of God on one side and the world, the flesh and the devil on the other. Dualism sunders god and nature. It also sunders male and female, encouraging man to frame concepts of militant heroism which ride roughshod over the female in all its manifestations. And it sunders mind from body.

Dualism might not have been so disastrous had it not so often involved value judgements. That is, one of the artificially separated components is usually labelled good and to be fostered, the other bad, to be eliminated or suppressed. Thus man wages war against his own wholeness and the wholeness of his world, in the attempt to impose his own will, vain aspirations and blinkered vision on the world.

In the Middle Ages these beliefs were expressed in elaborate systems and hierarchies such as the Great Chain of Being. This envisaged the whole of creation as a chain each link of which was a species or class of objects. The chain descended from the throne of god, passed through all the heavenly orders - seraphs, cherubs, thrones, denominations, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels and angels to man, and then down through the beasts, birds, reptiles, fishes, plants and minerals, ending at the lowest stone. The image of links in a chain implied that each species shared properties or attributes with those above and below it.

The position of man in the great chain was critical, since that link alone had to hold together the heavenly and earthly, spiritual and material creations. And every individual man had to find a way of coping with the division of his being between faculties he shared with the angels, his reason and judgement, and those he shared with the beasts, his appetites, instincts and passions, and, of course, his mortality. Such a man is primed for tragedy.

Awareness of this problem and the stating of it in these terms had remained constant for over two thousand years, from Pythagoras through the Platonists and neo-Platonists to such Renaissance thinkers as Pico della Mirandola and Giordano Bruno, who was in England in 1583-5, where he met or influenced Raleigh, Marlowe, Sidney and John Dee (the original of Prospero).

Never was the problem more acutely felt and widely discussed than in Elizabethan England. Two very different views were held about how man should attempt to solve the riddle of his own divided nature. The more common was to assume that the chain was also a ladder, and that the duty of man was to climb as high as possible. An Elizabethan formulation of this idea was the translation of Romei's *Courtier's Academy* published in 1598 (two years or so before *Hamlet*):

> It is in our power to live like a plant, living creature, like a man, and lastly like an angel; for if a man addict himself only to feeding and nourishment he becometh a plant, if to things sensual he is a brute beast, if to things reasonable and civil he groweth a celestial creature; but if he exalt the beautiful gift of his mind to things invisible and divine he transformeth himself into an angel and, to conclude, becometh the son of God.
>
> [Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture,* 75]

But others held that if God had wanted us to be angels, he would have created us angels in the first place; that to aspire above the place allotted to us in the scheme of things was to fall into the sin of pride; that the unique challenge to man was to accept and attempt to reconcile within him the opposing forces, to achieve a balance and harmony of his faculties. Theologians and moralists tended towards the first party, poets towards the second.

* * *

Shakespeare, throughout his works, accuses himself of every offence man is capable of, including, centrally, the crime against Nature. I do not say only that he accuses his characters, because Shakespeare's major characters are not invented to castigate human vices and follies (in the manner of Ben Jonson); they are projections from the depths of his own psyche. Shakespeare's universality stems not from his knowledge of all types and conditions of men (though that he no doubt had), but from his knowledge of himself and his ability to probe, imaginatively, even the unacknowledged parts of himself. It is

not a 'negative capability', committing himself to neither side, but the very positive capability of committing himself to both. He suffers with those who suffer, but he is also the cause of that suffering. His psyche is the battleground on which all conflicts (but primarily the sexual and the religious) are waged. As in all great imaginative art, his works are (as Hughes expresses it) a perpetual search for truer metaphors for his own nature. And that nature happened to be more complex, more all-embracing, more honest, and more receptive to 'the age and body of the time, his form and pressure', than any other of which we have record. Thus all the plays are, in a sense, history plays.

But just as Greek tragedy was both a record of a crisis in the history of Athens and in human consciousness, and also an embodiment of permanent truths about the human condition, equally relevant after two and a half millennia, so Shakespeare also dramatizes the persistent polarization of the male psyche. As Hughes puts it:

> At one pole is the rational ego, controlling the man's behaviour according to the needs and demands of a self-controlled society. At the other is the totality of this individual's natural, biological and instinctual life. ... From the point of view of the rational ego this totality appears to be female, and since it incorporates not only the divine source of his being, the feminine component of his own biological make-up, as well as the paranormal faculties and mysteries outside his rational ego, and seems to him in many respects continuous with external nature, he calls it the Goddess. Obviously, this is only a manner of speaking, or of thinking, but it is one that has imposed itself on man throughout his history. [*Shakespeare*, 513]

The hero's crime is the rejection of this Goddess. It is a crime not only against her and himself, but against humanity, since she is the source of life:

> It is the sin which every tragic hero commits, and it can be described as a failure of understanding, that alienation from the 'understanding heart' which ... has to be exposed, condemned, punished, corrected, and eventually redeemed. [231]

* * *

What was to become by 1600 a tempest of the mind, the crucible of the tragedies, started out in 1592 as a sophisticated conceit to please a patron, a daringly erotic best-seller. But even when he wanted to, Shakespeare was

incapable of writing superficially. He could no more keep his deepest concerns out of *Venus and Adonis* than he could keep Herne the Hunter out of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* or the morose Jaques out of *As You Like It*.

The story of *Venus and Adonis* is very simple and could be very quickly told. Venus, goddess of Love woos Adonis, a beautiful mortal. He resists, being disgusted by what he calls 'lust'. Venus tries everything, but fails to prevent him leaving her to go hunting. Later, having a premonition of disaster, she goes in search of him and finds his body savaged by a boar. He is transformed into a purple flower which she plucks and puts between her breasts. Nothing else happens. But Shakespeare elaborates this story to the tune of 1194 lines. Given his extreme economy and concentration in both the sonnets and the plays, why this prolixity? The simple story, chosen consciously, perhaps, as a witty cautionary tale to persuade the young Southampton, to whom it is dedicated, not to resist marriage (the theme also of the first seventeen sonnets), seems to have engaged with much larger and deeper issues which forced Shakespeare to dwell with fascination on its details and implications. Such fascination was justified, since this myth was to provide, as it were, a paradigm for all his mature work. It enabled him to combine, at the level where imagination finds its metaphors, his own most personal problems (his exile from Stratford and his family, his unrequited love for both a man and a woman, their betrayal of him, his covert Catholicism in an officially and repressively Protestant age) with the problems, the seething repressed energies, of Elizabeth's reign, energies which she contained with a reign of terror, but which were later to erupt in regicide and civil war. The fact that Shakespeare returned obsessively to this theme and these images throughout his career suggests that he had, almost accidentally, tapped a source of disturbing conflict in his age and in himself. Venus is the great goddess treated as a witch and a whore by the Puritans. She is also the voice of his own misused anima calling to the creative imagination for redress.

The first thing we are told about Adonis is that ‘hunting he loved, but love he laughed to scorn’. The pagan Goddess invites him to come 'where never serpent hisses', but Adonis inhabits a fallen world where her unabashed sexuality causes him to burn with shame, not desire. Venus, 'having no defects', cannot understand the basis of his rejection. She is herself Nature ('My beauty as the spring doth yearly grow'). Her body is a landscape with mountains, dales and pleasant fountains

> Sweet bottom-grass, and high delightful plain,
> Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough

where Adonis like a deer may safely graze. Therefore, in her terms, his rejection of her is unnatural. She marshals exactly the arguments Shakespeare deployed in the early sonnets to persuade Southampton to marry. She accuses him of being sick with self-love, narcissistic, and parasitic upon the natural world:

> Things growing to themselves are growth's abuse.
> Seeds spring from seeds, and beauty breedeth beauty.
> Thou wast begot; to get it is thy duty.
>
> Upon the earth's increase why shouldst thou feed
> Unless the earth with thy increase be fed?
> By law of nature thou art bound to breed,
> That thine may live when thou thyself art dead.

In the third sonnet Shakespeare asks his patron:

> Or who is he so fond will be the tomb
> Of his self-love to stop posterity?

And the next sonnet expands on this:

> Unthrifty loveliness, why dost thou spend
> Upon thyself thy beauty's legacy?
> Nature's bequest gives nothing but doth lend,
> And being frank she lends to those are free.

Shakespeare here comes perilously close to saying that to be thus in love with oneself ('having traffic with thyself alone') is to prefer masturbation to the unconditional offering of the self to the other which is love as Venus embodies it.

This theme is graphically illustrated in the incident of Adonis' horse which, as he goes to mount him, sees 'a breeding jennet, lusty, young, and proud'. Unlike his master, the courser needs no invitation, but

> Breaketh his rein, and to her straight goes he.
>
> Imperiously he leaps, he neighs, he bounds,

And now his woven girths he breaks asunder;
The bearing earth with his hard hoof he wounds,
Whose hollow womb resounds like heaven's thunder;
The iron bit he crusheth 'tween his teeth,
Controlling what he was controlled with.

Once free, the horse ceases to be violent and begins to behave with 'gentle majesty and modest pride'. The violence transfers itself to the rider, whose 'angry stir' the horse completely ignores:

He sees his love, and nothing else he sees,
For nothing else with his proud sight agrees.

Pride seems to be the key, what Hopkins calls 'This pride of prime's enjoyment':

Round-hoofed, short-jointed, fetlocks shag and long,
Broad breast, full eye, small head, and nostril wide,
High crest, short ears, straight legs and passing strong,
Thin mane, thick tail, broad buttock, tender hide:
Look what a horse should have he did not lack,
Save a proud rider on so proud a back.

The very language here rears and curvets. It needs no caparisons or trappings. A mere Whitman-like listing of the horse's physical attributes is enough. And indeed there is a remarkably similar passage in 'Song of Myself', except that Whitman provides his horse with a worthy rider:

A gigantic beauty of a stallion, fresh and responsive to my caresses,
Head high in the forehead, wide between the ears,
Limbs glossy and supple, tail dusting the ground,
Eyes full of sparkling wickedness, ears finely cut, flexibly moving.
His nostrils dilate as my heels embrace him,
His well-built limbs tremble with pleasure as we race around and return.
I but use you a minute, then I resign you, stallion,
Why do I need your paces when I myself out-gallop them?
Even as I stand or sit passing faster than you.

What, then, is lacking in Adonis, what curbs his proud manhood, what iron bit controls him? It is impossible to use such metaphors without remembering the famous passage in Plato's *Phaedrus* where the driver of a chariot (will or ego) has to deal with a recalcitrant horse (desire or libido), which, through his puritan spectacles, he can see only as ugly: 'crooked, lumbering, ill-made; stiff-necked, short-throated, snub-nosed; his coat is black and his eyes a bloodshot grey; wantonness and boastfulness are his companions, and he is hairy-eared and deaf, hardly controllable even with whip and goad'. When this horse tries to take the bit between its teeth, and rush forward prancing towards the object of its desire, 'the driver ... falls back like a racing charioteer at the barrier, and with a still more violent backward pull jerks the bit from between the teeth of the lustful horse, drenches his abusive tongue and jaws with blood, and forcing his legs and haunches against the ground reduces him to torment. Finally, after several repetitions of this treatment, the wicked horse abandons his lustful ways'; meekly now he executes the wishes of his driver.' What I mean by calling this attitude puritanical is clear, I think, from a passage a few pages earlier in the *Phaedrus*: 'Pure was the light and pure were we from the pollution of the walking sepulchre which we call a body, to which we are bound like an oyster to its shell'.

Adonis is blind to the beauty of his stallion, and gives it no chance to respond to his caresses. He seeks to subdue its nature entirely to his purposes (which are to escape from Venus and to go hunting). He is equally blind to the beauty of Venus, since he cannot see the love which declares and offers itself as anything but lust. The imagery Shakespeare chooses to describe Adonis' rejection of her would be absurdly hyperbolic were he merely embroidering the romantic cliché that 'looks kill love'. What he is actually doing, as surely as with the images of storm and savage beasts in *King Lear*, is presaging the chaos which follows when Nature herself is violated:

> Like a red morn that ever yet betokened
> Wrack to the seaman, tempest to the field ...
> Or as the wolf doth grin before he barketh,
> Or as a berry breaks before it staineth,
> Or like the deadly bullet of a gun,
> His meaning struck her ere his words begun.

Adonis, by his rejection, is releasing destructive energies into the world. As he sees Venus tempting him to the sin of lust, she becomes, in his eyes, not Venus the Queen of Heaven but the foul witch Hecate, the Queen of Hell:

> For by this black-faced night, desire's foul nurse,
> Your treatise makes me like you worse and worse.

Venus approves the behaviour of Adonis' horse, saying that deep desire should have no bounds. But Adonis replies:

> I know not love,' quoth he, 'nor will not know it,
> Unless it be a boar, and then I'll chase it.

By thus treating love as a boar, a foul and dangerous thing to be fought and killed, Adonis begins the process of converting Love (Venus) into a boar. For the first half of the poem Venus has been pleading and softly feminine, but now a transformation begins. Just as Dionysus, in his feminine aspect, spends half *The Bacchae* trying to win over Pentheus with gentle persuasion, but is at last transformed by Pentheus' own violent rejection into his opposite, male and murderous, the bull, so Adonis forces Venus to become more and more predatory, actually converts her love into ravening lust:

> Now quick desire hath caught the yielding prey,
> And glutton-like she feeds, yet never filleth.
> Her lips are conquerors, his lips obey,
> Paying what ransom the insulter willeth;
> Whose vulture thought doth pitch the price so high
> That she will draw his lips' rich treasure dry.
>
> And having felt the sweetness of the spoil,
> With blindfold fury she begins to forage;
> Her face doth reek and smoke, her blood doth boil,
> And careless lust stirs up a desperate courage,
> Planting oblivion, beating reason back,
> Forgetting shame's pure blush and honor's wrack.

By attempting to separate out 'pure' love, which is completely subservient to reason, shame and honour, from the totality of love Venus had originally offered him, Adonis splits Venus into the trembling, heartsick woman who

warns him so graphically against the boar, and the boar itself. He speaks to her like Hamlet to his mother:

> Call it not love, for Love to heaven is fled
> Since sweating Lust on earth usurped his name.

But, as with Hamlet, his definition of lust leaves no room for love in bodily terms.

Venus is clearly Nature, and Nature is not divisible. In her loving phase, she associates herself with timid and vulnerable creatures. If Adonis must hunt, she says, let him hunt creatures which cannot harm him, the hare, for example. But Venus can describe the hunting of a hare only from the point of view of the hare. She 'goes into a hare With sorrow and sighs and mickle care', but Adonis is unmoved by the sufferings of poor Wat. Again, she goes into 'a milch doe, whose swelling dugs do ache, Hasting to feed her fawn'. And again into a snail, 'whose tender horns being hit Shrinks backward in his shelly cave with pain'. Adonis drives her back in pain into the darkness, the underworld, from which she emerges frothing at the mouth. She warns him in the clearest terms that to choose the boar is to choose death (which Venus calls 'divorce of love') in preference to life, to commit suicide. In rabid defence of his self-sufficiency he strikes out at all forms of love, including sympathy, the ability to suffer with those that suffer; he strikes at the feminine in all its forms - woman, Nature, his own anima. Richard of Gloucester's words would not be out of place in his mouth:

> And that word 'love', which greybeards call divine,
> Be resident in men like one another,
> And not in me! I am myself alone.

(Richard's totem is the boar.) And when he swears by 'black-faced night, desire's foul nurse' he is on the way to transforming himself into a Tarquin or a MacBeth. The extreme, frigid, love-denying, life-denying puritanism of an Angelo is the perfect breeding ground for the boar, the murderous tyrant.

Adonis escapes from Venus, preferring the boar-hunt; but he is no match for this boar. Finding the mangled body of Adonis, Venus in her distraction cannot distinguish between herself and the boar:

> If he did see his face, why then I know
> He thought to kiss him, and hath killed him so.

'Tis true, 'tis true! thus was Adonis slain:
He ran upon the boar with his sharp spear,
Who did not whet his teeth at him again,
But by a kiss thought to persuade him there;
    And nuzzling in his flank, the loving swine
    Sheathed unaware the tusk in his soft groin.

It is a just reversal, since Adonis, terrified by the thought of the soft groin of Venus, is keen enough to plunge his spear into the living body of Nature. Venus then stains her own face with Adonis' blood.

She means, at the end, to 'immure herself and not be seen'. Love goes underground, and becomes, instead of a source of joy and harmony and fertility, a cause of suffering, discord, 'war and dire events'. All this would be absurdly disproportionate if it were a consequence of one young man desiring 'to grow unto himself'. But clearly much more than that is involved. Adonis may begin as Southampton, but he rapidly becomes a part of Shakespeare also, a part of those who were shaping English history at that time, and a part of each of us. He represents the Protestant attempt to degrade the Queen of Heaven to the Great Whore, but also the perennial male rejection and desacralization of Nature in the name of some perfection or abstraction assumed to be accessible only to the detached male intellect.

The character of Adonis we are to meet again and again in the mature works. In middle age he is called Angelo, and is still attempting to freeze out unconditional love in the form of Mariana. In later life he is called Prospero, now devoting his most potent Art to excluding Venus from the magic circle of his isle. In between, there will be the tragedies, where love, as Venus prophesies, will always be attended by jealousy and betrayal:

It shall be fickle, false, and full of fraud;
Bud and be blasted, in a breathing while;
The bottom poison, and the top o'erstrawed
With sweets that shall the truest sight beguile.
    The strongest body shall it make most weak,
    Strike the wise dumb, and teach the fool to speak.

* * *

It was to be some years before the truth of Venus' prophesies was brought home to Shakespeare. In the meantime, he was quick to see the potential of his theme for comedy.

Faust. What is the end of study, let me know?

Meph. Why, that to know which else we should not know.

Faust. Things hid and barr'd, you mean, from common sense?

Meph. Ay, that is study's god-like recompense.

Faust. Come on, then; I will swear to study so,
To know the thing I am forbid to know.

I wonder how many readers will have been taken in by this. These lines are not, in fact, a conversation between Faustus and Mephistophilis from Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1592), but between Berowne and the King of Navarre from Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* (1593). I have transposed them to the apparently very different context of Marlowe's play in order to suggest that, though Shakespeare's mode is very light, his theme is not so distant from Marlowe's. Marlowe was, in fact, a member of the very 'school of night' to which the King later refers as wearing 'the badge of hell', the heretical 'Schoole of Atheism' whose chief patron, Sir Walter Raleigh, had been disgraced in 1592. Shakespeare's patron, Southampton, was a member of Essex' rival faction. We can get a whiff of the spirit of the School of Night from a poem which Peele addressed to another member of it, the Earl of Northumberland, in 1593, the very year in which *Doctor Faustus* had its first public performance, Marlowe was murdered, and Shakespeare wrote *Love's Labour's Lost*:

Familiar with the stars and zodiac,
To whom the heaven lies open as her book;
By whose directions undeceivable,
Leaving our schoolmen's vulgar trodden paths,
And following the ancient reverend steps
Of Trismegistus and Pythagoras,
Through uncouth ways and unaccessible,
Dost pass into the spacious pleasant fields
Of divine science and philosophy;

From whence beholding the deformities
Of common errors, and world's vanity,
Dost here enjoy the sacred sweet content
That baser souls, not knowing, not affect.

Love's Labour's Lost opens with the King of Navarre inviting three other noble young men, Berowne, Longaville and Dumaine, to join him in living, for three years, a monastic life devoted to study. There is no suggestion that their studies are likely to lead them towards atheism or the black arts, but there is a strong suggestion that all such academies, such withdrawals from the world into the life of the mind, are fraught with danger. When such behaviour is no more than the passing fancy of affected and inexperienced youth, it is no great matter, or matter for comic resolution. But it had been a serious matter for Raleigh, and was to be so for the Duke in *Measure for Measure* and for Prospero. Navarre's desire for eternal fame, and for the 'god-like recompense' of the study of 'things hid and barr'd' is not so far from Faustus' lines:

O, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence,
Is promis'd to the studious artisan!
...
A sound magician is a demi-god;
Here tire, my brains, to get a deity!

The danger is of that *hubris* which drives a man, in straining for an unnatural and unattainable god-like perfection, to spurn or neglect his proper sphere, the life of the body in time and in the world. Man's unique place in the Great Chain of Being, half beast, half angel, gave him two options. He could either strive to exterminate the beast in himself and become god-like, perfect himself in opposition to Nature (including his own god-given nature); or he could seek to reconcile the warring elements (as the alchemists did), converting duality, the terrible dual vision of tragedy, by acceptance into mutuality, interdependence, harmony, symbolized by marriage. And this is the pattern of all the festive comedies.

The young men commit themselves to strict abstinence in a parody of puritanical legalism - 'Out late edict shall strongly stand in force', - swearing to keep 'those statutes / That are recorded in this schedule here'. They are making war against their own affections, vowing to die to love. If the soul is that part of the self which loves, then, in subscribing their names, they are, like Faustus,

signing their souls away. Of course we know from the play's title, and from the tone of the opening, that they are not on the road to damnation (or if they are, we know that they will not get far along it), but they are in danger of errors which, without the conventions of comedy, and without the saving intervention of strong women (in collusion with the old Adam in Berowne), could have been more serious. But they are, underneath their privileged affectations, normal young men, merely carried away by a passing fashionable enthusiasm. Their commitment to their oath is very shallow. Berowne is a little more mature, realistic and sensible than the others. His irrepressible common-sense undermines the whole enterprise from the outset. He can't take 'that angel knowledge' seriously. He knows the value of book-learning:

> Small have continual plodders ever won
> Save base authority from others' books.

He knows that the attempt to deny their own affections is doomed:

> For every man with his affects is born
> Not by might master'd, but by special grace.

Moreover, he knows that it is perverse to attempt to defeat the seasonal nature of Nature and of man's life within it:

> At Christmas I no more desire a rose
> Than wish a snow in May's new-fangled shows,
> But like of each thing that in season grows.

In spite of these reservations, he takes his oath in the spirit of making up a team for a game. But it is a game which involves sealing off the four from the rest of the human race.

It is, after all, not a play about Berowne. None of the comedies are plays about individuals locked within their own characters, as all the tragedies are (and the satirical comedies of Jonson or Molière); they are about communities where people determine their own and each other's lives. There is the scene where poor constable Dull has not spoken a word, nor understood one neither, but is, in the last line, drawn into the festivities: 'I'll make one in a dance, or so.' Despite the focus on marriage, love is not, in these plays, merely sexual love, but the whole network of sympathies and dependencies which knit together a

human community, and weave human beings into the wider patterns of the non-human world.

No sooner have the four young men taken their oaths, including the oath 'not to see a woman in that term', than the pressures of 'necessity' - that is, of real life - force them to break it. The Princess of France arrives:

> We must perforce dispense with this decree.
> She must lie here on mere necessity.

That force, as Berowne is quick to point out, is the force which decrees, far more strongly than any king, that life cannot go forward without feelings and relationships:

> Necessity will make us all forsworn
> Three thousand times within this three years' space.

In the same speech in which Boyet describes the king in terms of perfection, he describes the Princess in terms of completeness and the prodigality of Nature. When the king tells her that he would be breaking his oath to admit her to his court, she says: "Tis deadly sin to keep that oath'. She is aware that what the young men are doing is not only silly and impractical, but would, were they to carry it through, lead to the deadly sin of Pride. For the idea that perfection could be achieved in isolation from women and from the world at large, is hubristic in the extreme. Of course, this being the kind of play it is, the king and his three courtiers immediately fall in love with the Princess and her three attendants.

As we near the end of the play, our heroes have far to go if they are to prove themselves worthy of the hands of these ladies. Can their love survive outside the summer holiday climate? Could it survive in the winter world, the world where people actually die? The love the young men profess must be given the test of time, and of exposure to some deprivation far from the self-indulgence of the court. If a year of 'frosts and fasts, hard lodging and thin weeds' does not nip the hothouse blossoms of their love, they will be accepted. For shallow and false reasons they had sought to repudiate love for the sake of the monastic life; now they must endure the monastic life for the sake of love. Another year is 'too long for a play', so the play must end without the usual multiple marriages, but not without a potent affirmation of community, and of human life in harmony with the life of nature and the passing seasons. The play ends with one of Shakespeare's finest songs. Nothing could be further from the

artifice of the opening. In its homely simplicity, naturalness, realism, in its movement from spring to winter, it contains that whole 'gross world' and its 'baser slaves' that the four had vowed to die to, and measures the distance they have yet to travel to their hoped-for atonement.

* * *

If I am to avoid the temptation to write at book length on Shakespeare, I must restrict myself to little more than jottings on some of the ways in which the theme of the crime against nature surfaces in several of the tragedies and problem plays prior to Shakespeare's final frontal assault on it in *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*.

When, in 1600, Shakespeare moved into his tragic mode, licking his wounds from his own recent encounter with Hecate ('Who art as black as hell, as dark as night'), the *Venus and Adonis* paradigm revealed its tragic potential. The earlier male protagonists of this phase, Hamlet, Troilus, Angelo, Othello, are all variants or developments of Adonis. All, in their pride, idealism, lack of self-knowledge, commit the crime against woman, against Nature, and against their own best selves.

Though Claudius is the overt villain in *Hamlet*, what interests Shakespeare is Hamlet's crime, the unconscious crime of an apparently noble mind. In his first soliloquy, before he knows anything of the murder of his father, Hamlet is already suicidal: 'this flesh' is too soiled to live; not only his flesh, but all flesh is 'rank and gross'. He is later to say that the earth, which had seemed to him a 'goodly frame' has become 'a sterile promontory', and its noblest work, man, a mere 'quintessence of dust'.

Hamlet, formerly 'the expectancy and rose of the fair state' has swung to a position of extreme disgust without ever passing through the middle ground, where the good things of life are valued for what they are. In this soliloquy there are no wholesome brothers, no roses of May, nothing but rank weeds, canker and blight. What is the point of pulling out the fattest weed in such a garden?

Shakespeare goes out of his way to make the point that Hamlet's loathing of and rejection of his mother has nothing to do with his father's murder; but also implies that it has little to do with his uncle either. Hamlet's father claims that he had died with all his imperfections on his head. Yet for Hamlet he is the perfect man, and his perfection had impressed itself on the young Hamlet's mind as expressing a kind of love which did not descend to bodies, which spurned the physical with a god-like purity:

> So excellent a king, that was to this
> Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother
> That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
> Visit her face too roughly.

In this he is contrasted not only with his bestial brother, but also with his all-too-physical wife: 'Why, she would hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on'.

Joseph Campbell recognizes this as a recurring type in myth, literature and real life:

> The crux of the difficulty lies in the fact that our conscious view of what life ought to be seldom corresponds to what life really is. Generally we refuse to admit within ourselves or within our friends, the fullness of that pushing, self-protective, malodorous, carnivorous, lecherous fever which is the very nature of the organic cell. ... But when it suddenly dawns on us, or is forced to our attention, that everything we think or do is necessarily tainted with the odor of the flesh, then, not uncommonly, there is experienced a moment of revulsion: life, the acts of life, the organs of life, become intolerable to the pure, the pure, pure soul. [*Hero* 121-2]

The young idealist would clearly have subscribed to the views of Pico della Mirandola:

> Neither heavenly nor earthly ... thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul's reason into the higher natures which are divine.

'A beast that wants discourse of reason' would have mourned longer than his mother. Yet he is flesh of her flesh. It is not only the image of his mother and his uncle making love over the nasty sty which sickens him. He is clearly almost as horrified by the thought of any sexual or physical contact between his parents. Sexuality itself is the problem, within the larger problem of physicality and mortality.

Once an extreme idealism is confronted with a reality which it cannot accommodate, it is suddenly replaced by its opposite, an equally extreme cynicism. Thus Hamlet sees only two possibilities for Ophelia; either she remains in the pestilent rank world to breed more sinners or she enters a

nunnery. Here in Hamlet's mind is first adumbrated the division of the world into nunnery and brothel which becomes the Vienna of *Measure for Measure*.

* * *

The earliest sonnets are all assaults on time, alternative strategies to ensure that 'beauty's rose might never die' [1]. 'Devouring time' [19] is imagined as doing to beauty what the boar did to Adonis - 'And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field' [2]. Later there is a growing recognition that only the infatuation 'in lovers' eyes' can evade the reality of 'sluttish time' [55]. 'So true a fool is love' [57] that he lives in a dream, impervious to proofs. In his desperation and self-abasement in the later sonnets Shakespeare offers as a definition of love that it does not 'alter when it alteration finds' [116].

'The Phoenix and the Turtle', probably written about 1600, is Shakespeare's valediction to 'love and constancy' - 'Truth and Beauty buried be'. When he had believed his love to be absolute and eternal he could allow time to 'burn the long-lived phoenix in her blood' [19] in the assurance that renewed love would rise from the ashes. Now

> Beauty, truth, and rarity,
> Grace in all simplicity,
> Here enclosed, in cinders lie.
>
> Death is now the phoenix' nest,
> And the turtle's loyal breast
> To eternity doth rest,
>
> Leaving no posterity.

There is no hint of bitterness in 'The Phoenix and the Turtle', only the deepest sadness and regret for the irrecoverable. But by the time we come to *Troilus and Cressida* in 1602, bitterness floods in with the recognition that what has been lost was never more than absurd idealism. Shakespeare now puts many of the words he had himself spoken in all earnestness in the sonnets into the mouth of Troilus, but perhaps the most telling are given to Cressida:

> Time, force and death,
> Do to this body what extremes you can;
> But the strong base and building of my love

Is as the very centre of the earth,
Drawing all things to it. [IV ii 104-8]

By putting such words into the mouth of Cressida Shakespeare ruthlessly castigates his earlier Troilus-self. Troilus' inevitable disillusionment is his own: 'Never did young man fancy / With so eternal and so fix'd a soul' [V ii 164-5]. 'Lust in action' may be an 'expense of spirit in a waste of shame' [129], but so is its opposite, the attempt to purify sexual love to the point where it becomes a sanctifying absolute. For this Shakespeare now sees as no more than the ego using up all its faith and energies in a fruitless battle with 'time, force and death', a battle, that is, with 'Nature, sovereign mistress over wrack' [126], repudiating her in pursuit of the elixir of immortality, 'love's thrice-repured nectar' [III ii 20]. Shakespeare's desire that there should be 'no more dying' [146] is ultimately no different from Beckett's that there should be 'no more nature' [*Endgame*].

Troilus is a particularly clear example of the danger of an idealism which does not spurn woman and the life of the body, but exalts and refines them in an attempt to transcend time, chance and death. Adolescent, hot-house sexuality, requiring no value in the object beyond what the lover invests it with, is required to provide absolutes worthy the devotion of life and faith. Such a 'winnowed purity in love' does, in effect, spurn the real woman and the real possibilities of sexual fulfilment. It can lead only to disillusion, which causes a swing to its opposite, a cynicism or nihilism which denies value to all women and all life in time. In reaction Troilus transforms himself into his opposite, an agent of death and ruin, dealing 'mad and fantastic execution'. His model is Mars 'inflam'd with Venus'. The possessive lust which inflamed Mars was such as to transform him into the boar which savaged Adonis. By his insistence that love should be eternal, even in the form of an adolescent 'fancy' for a sexy stranger, Troilus has provoked the goddess to 'inflame' him with a madness which is both murderous and suicidal.

Troilus' 'love', purified out of all grounding in the world of substance, corresponds to the equally empty and sterile 'honour' in the name of which Troy fights and falls. Yet the dishonourable cynical pragmatism of the Greeks is even worse. In this play there appears to be no safe passage between the dangerous shores of will and judgement, no middle ground on which the life of substance and process can flourish. For Shakespeare's expression of the fullness of life is always, elsewhere, in terms of Nature’s fruitfulness and bounty. The play leaves us in an unreclaimed waste land with putrefying

corpses, like Thebes after the slaughter of the Sphinx, or like the world after the last holocaust:

> What's past and what's to come is strew'd with husks
> And formless ruin of oblivion.

* * *

Troilus and Othello are both idealists who violate love as effectively by putting it on an absurdly high pedestal as by rejecting it. Troilus was unlucky in his choice of woman, but even a Desdemona could not have given him 'such a winnow'd purity in love' as he demanded.

When Desdemona is forced to make a public declaration of her love for Othello, she does so in frankly sexual terms. Her heart's 'subdued even to the utmost pleasure of my lord'. She loves the Moor, she says, 'to live with him', so that, were she to be left behind when he goes to Cyprus 'The rites for which I love him are bereft me'. 'Rites' can only mean full marital intercourse. It is an admirably mature, sane, normal, declaration.

Othello turns a deaf ear to it, and unconsciously repudiates her, claiming that he is not interested in her body, that he is too old for sexual love. He begs that Desdemona should be allowed to go with him

> Not to comply with heat, the young affects
> In me defunct, and proper satisfaction,
> But to be free and bounteous of her mind;
> ...no, when light-wing'd toys,
> And feather'd Cupid, foils with wanton dullness
> My speculative and active instruments,
> That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
> Let housewives make a skillet of my helm.

That for which Desdemona has consecrated her soul and fortunes, sexual love, is dismissed by Othello as something which would corrupt and taint his reputation. It is later revealed that he is, in fact, obsessed with her 'sweet body', 'that whiter skin of hers than snow', but to admit such feelings to himself would undermine his self-esteem and the image of whiter-than-white he seeks to project. I imagine Othello when we first see him dressed in dazzling white. He probably employs a better tailor than any of the Venetian grandees. His whole life effort has been to repudiate everything he and the world associated

with blackness – his passions, his kinship with the whole animal creation. To acknowledge this part of himself would be to see himself as Iago sees him – the ‘lascivious Moor’. To betray this part of himself, the part Coleridge was to call the ‘natural man’, is to repudiate Venus.

Thus Shakespeare is at pains to reveal to us that just as Hamlet was incomplete, tainted in his mind, before the Ghost undermined him, so Othello is not 'all-in-all sufficient' before Iago begins his work. He is already dry tinder awaiting the spark Iago supplies. He is a mature version of Adonis or Troilus for whom if love cannot be an absolute outside time it might as well be as Iago defines it 'merely a lust of the blood', in which case it can be left to goats and monkeys. The goddess, as always, once denied, appears in her ugly and destructive aspects, the only aspects in which Iago has ever seen her. Iago is but the externalization of what is left in Othello’s psyche when his attempt to exclude the goddess altogether fails.

If there were no envious and calumniating Iago to push the pedestal into the ditch, envious and calumniating time would do it sooner or later. Othello half realizes that only death can preserve perfection:

> If it were now to die,
> 'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear
> My soul hath her content so absolute,
> That not another comfort like to this
> Succeeds in unknown fate.

Desdemona is disturbed by this:

> The heavens forbid
> But that our loves and comforts should increase,
> Even as our days do grow.

But the absolute content Othello strains for is by definition outside time, and therefore outside the world of process, the natural world where things increase and grow, and die in due season.

Othello's unconscious is a stormy sea he has never learned to navigate. His disciplined military life and apparently complete acculturization to Venetian civilization have so far successfully protected him from exposure to it. Iago senses that the veneer is thin; that his task is simply to lift a corner of it, and Othello will entirely lose his sufficiency:

My blood begins my safer guides to rule,
And passion having my best judgement collied
Assays to lead the way. [II.iii.196-8]

Having failed to preserve his image of Desdemona as angel, Othello relegates her first to the bestial, then, still lower, to the mineral. Her human body and beauty is something his mind cannot cope with. To escape the intolerable attraction of warm flesh and balmy breath (divorced from any knowledge of or interest in Desdemona beyond her beauty) he tries to convert it imaginatively into the cold and hard forms of non-human beauty which do not engage his passions, snow, monumental alabaster, chrysolite, pearl. All these are lifeless ('cold, cold, my girl'). It is safer, for his self-esteem, to kill her first and love her after.

Othello is the opposite of Hamlet's definition of the just man. Because his blood and judgement are so ill commingled, he becomes a pipe for Iago's finger to play what stop he please. By trying to overrule his natural passion he converts it into a demon and becomes its slave. In defence of male 'reputation' he kills the thing he loves, and with it his own soul.

* * *

The three characters in the whole of Shakespeare who make the most stringent efforts to banish Sir John, and with him the goddess, are Adonis, Angelo and Prospero. And of these by far the most fanatical is Angelo in *Measure for Measure*.

At the beginning of the play we are led to believe that both the Duke and Angelo have lived monkish lives, in obscurity and seclusion, studying to frame theories of human nature and of government. The Duke has long had the opportunity to put his theories into practice, but has been unable to do so. He ends up with strict laws which he cannot bring himself to enforce. The result is that the law loses all respect and liberty breeds licence. Vienna has become a 'permissive' society (he uses the very word). Frazer reports that in many cultures the attempt by the priest-king to excercise spiritual and temporal powers simultaneously proved so burdensome that 'they sank under its weight into spiritless creatures, cloistered recluses, from whose nerveless fingers the reins of government slipped into the firmer grasp of men who were often content to wield the reality of sovereignty without its name'. The Duke is in not quite so bad a case, but the split in him is projected onto Viennese life with its polarized and life-denying extremes of convent and stews.

The Duke regards his own leniency as a vice rather than a virtue, and prefers Angelo as someone more likely to have the courage of his own convictions, as a man apparently without sin, whose own life could stand up to the most searching judgement. Angelo's severity is approved not only by the Duke but also by Escalus and others, including, however grudgingly, even Lucio.

But it is typical of the manifold ambiguities of this play that the Duke's motives should be mixed. His admiration for Angelo is from the first qualified by a slight suspicion that he might be too good to be true, a 'seemer' most likely to reveal his true colours when corrupted by absolute power. In a sense he is conducting an experiment to see whether harsh laws and harsher punishments, rigidly enforced, will in fact produce a better life in the commonwealth. The experiment shows that too much restraint is as damaging to the state as too much liberty, and more damaging to those who enforce it.

Within this framework of the problem of Justice, the real interest of the play lies in the delineation of two characters, Angelo and Isabella, in the way in which Shakespeare puts the conspicuous virtue of each under such pressure that it breaks open to reveal something ugly and destructive lurking unacknowledged beneath it, from which it has derived its extreme severity. The psychology is strikingly modern, and still shocking to those who believe in Victorian moral values. It fleshes out Blake's proverb of Hell 'Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires'.

In Angelo this is worked out in a fairly obvious and mechanical way. It is implied in his very name, surely a spiritually pretentious and unnatural name for a man:

> They say this Angelo was not made by man and woman,
> after this downright way of creation.

Montaigne knew these victims of moral hubris: ‘They want to get out of themselves and escape from the man. That is madness: instead of changing into angels, they change into beasts’. The man who denies his kinship with humanity and nurses the spiritual ambition to be like an angel is in the way to overreach himself, fall, and become, instead, a devil.

When Angelo finds himself attracted by Isabella, what is to prevent him simply declaring his love for her? He is the kind of man she admires. If he freely pardoned her brother he would stand in her good grace. But for him love and lust have become separated as good and evil. When, in his desire for

Isabella, he is forced to recognize his own humanity, he can only recognize it as sinful lust. Wilson Knight describes this very well:

> Sexual desire has long been anathema to him, so his warped idealism forbids any healthy love. Good and evil change places in his mind, since this passion is immediately recognized as good, yet, by every one of his stock judgements, condemned as evil. The Devil becomes a 'good angel'. And this wholesale reversion leaves Angelo in sorry plight now: he has no moral values left. Since sex has been synonymous with foulness in his mind, this new love, reft from the start of moral sanction in a man who 'scarce confesses that his blood flows', becomes swiftly a devouring and curbless lust.
>
> [*The Wheel of Fire* 87-8]

There is also a very pertinent passage by Ted Hughes about Adonis, which is even more apt for Angelo:

> The boar that demolished Adonis was, in other words, his own repressed lust - crazed and bestialized by being separated from his intelligence and denied. The Venus which he refused became a demon and supplanted his consciousness. The frigid puritan, with a single terrible click, becomes a sexual maniac - a destroyer of innocence and virtue, a violator of the heavenly soul, of the very thing he formerly served and adored. ... This metamorphosis is triggered by a simple and one might think academic factor: namely, Adonis's Calvinist spectacles, which divide nature, and especially love, the creative force of nature, into abstract good and physical evil. Nature's attempts to recombine, first in love, then in whatever rebuffed love turns into, and the puritan determination that she shall not recombine under any circumstances, are the power-house and torture-chamber of the Complete Works. And the vital twist, the mysterious chemical change that converts the resisting high-minded puritan to the being of murder and madness, is that occult crossover of Nature's maddened force - like a demon - into the brain that had rejected her. [*Winter Pollen,* 114]

There is no fundamental critical disagreement about Angelo; but Isabella is another matter. For centuries she was regarded as one of Shakespeare's most pure and noble heroines; and there are still critics who find her wholly admirable. In terms of plot she is set against Angelo and suffers much at his

hands. But it seems to me that in terms of the deeper meanings of the play she is essentially his female counterpart. Both are puritans dedicated to unusually harsh disciplines. Her seeming, screened by her youth and innocence and habit of a nun, is much less obvious than Angelo's, and less melodramatically revealed; but revealed it certainly is, if we are alive to the implications of the lines she speaks. She knows herself as little as Angelo knows himself, and is also deficient in common humanity.

Isabella's first appearance in the play is inauspicious. For we find that she is so far from accepting her own sexuality that she is about to enter a nunnery where she will never again speak to a man but with covered face and in the presence of the prioress. She gives no moral or spiritual reasons for this. The first thing she says is that the rules of the strict order of St.Clare are not strict enough for her. Her desire for 'a more strict restraint' upon the sisters parallels Angelo's desire for stricter laws and law-enforcement in Vienna - and the previous scene had ended with the Duke's expression of his doubts about the genuineness of that.

Of course there are vast differences between Isabella and Angelo. He is a mature victimizer, she a young and innocent victim. The text does not specify her age, but the most theatrically effective of many Isabellas I have seen was the youngest. We can focus the issue by asking where Isabella lives, and with whom. There is no mention of home or parents for her or Claudio. Indeed, there do not seem to be any ordinary houses in Vienna. When Pompey says that all the houses in the suburbs must be plucked down, he means bawdy houses; and it seems that, apart from the public buildings, ducal palace and gaol, there are only two kinds of houses, religious houses and bawdy houses. Even Mariana's moated grange is at Saint Luke's, a religious establishment, and moated as if to keep out the corruption of the city. We must assume that Isabella's parents are dead. Perhaps she has been living with Claudio; but he has left, or is about to leave to live with Juliet. Pompey claims that if the brothels were closed it would be necessary to 'geld and spay all the youth of the city'. Claudio and Juliet try to live in terms of normal sexual love. Claudio is condemned to death for it, and Juliet imprisoned along with the whores. It is not surprising that a passionate but high-minded and inexperienced girl such as Isabella should in such a moral environment equate her integrity with her chastity, and, feeling that she is obliged to choose between a pure life within the nunnery and a corrupt life out of it, unhesitatingly chooses the former. Nevertheless, the play judges that her decision is deeply mistaken. In her desire to protect herself against corruption she rejects not only sex, but all intercourse with men and

most forms of intercourse with women; she rejects the world, including love, and, in doing so, compromises her own full humanity.

Angelo did not recognize himself to be a man. Isabella is immediately presented to us as aspiring to be something more than a woman, 'a thing enskied and sainted', an 'immortal spirit'. She succeeds only in being something less than a woman. In the dichotomy the play sets up between nunnery and brothel, it is Mistress Overdone, a bawd, who exemplifies womanly compassion and Christian charity by taking in Lucio's bastard. Can we imagine Isabella doing as much for her brother's child? (Mariana has to give her another lesson in compassion at the end.) The sterility of the life to which she aspires is underlined by the imagery of richness and fertility in which Lucio describes to her her brother's 'sin':

> Your brother and his lover have embraced;
> As those that feed grow full, as blossoming time
> That from the seedness the bare fallow brings
> To teeming foison, even so her plenteous womb
> Expresses his full tilth and husbandry.

It is the Provost, a man distinguished by a mature and balanced humanity, who describes Claudio as 'more fit to do another such offence, than die for this'. Claudio is a very ordinary young man, concerned not with abstract morality, but with living and loving. Yet Isabella is persuaded, very reluctantly, to intervene on her brother's behalf, not because a palpable and cruel injustice is about to be performed, but solely because Claudio happens to be her brother. Had it been any other man she would have concurred with Angelo's handling of the case. That is why she is so cold for so long and needs so much prompting.

When Isabella comes to plead for Claudio she never asks what harm he has done, or why his offence should be a capital one (as do not only Lucio, but also Escalus and the Provost). On the contrary, she claims that it is

> a vice that most I do abhor,
> And most desire should meet the blow of justice.

Why should she abhor the lovemaking of a young man and his fiancée so much if not in fear of her own sexuality - for the same reason, that is, that she wishes to enter a nunnery?

Just as Angelo's puritanism ensured that sex could only present itself to him in perverse forms, so Isabella's also diverts her sexuality from its normal course.

There is a kind of perverted sexuality in the language she uses when Angelo makes his proposition - what Leavis calls 'a kind of sensuality of martyrdom':

> Were I under the terms of death,
> Th'impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,
> And strip myself to death as to a bed
> That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield
> My body up to shame.

She feels that her integrity is dependent on her 'honour', a term she never questions, and which she confuses with her chastity. She is in no doubt that her chastity weighs more than her brother's life:

> Then, Isabel live chaste, and brother die:
> More than our brother is our chastity.

How can those who admire Isabella justify that vicious line? It is a product of sheer panic. She is under extreme pressure, but her total moral collapse in the name of morality calls that morality in question. And there is worse to come. When Claudio suggests that a sin done in charity, to save a life, is no sin but a virtue (and he is theologically impeccable), she becomes as ruthless as Angelo in defence of her puritanical self-esteem:

> Might but my bending down
> Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed.
> I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death;
> No word to save thee.

Yet she has no objection to the plan to let another woman make the same sacrifice on her behalf. The Duke has already told Juliet that sorrow which is merely for the shame sin brings 'is always toward ourselves, not heaven'. He speaks in the same vein as many Elizabethan moralists, such as Tyndale, who was very hard on Lucrece, another woman who placed an absolute value on chastity:

> She sought her own glory in her chastity and not god's. When she had lost her chastity, then she counted herself most abominable in the sight of all men, and for very pain and thought which she had, not that she had displeased god, but that she had lost her honour, slew herself. Look how

great her glory and rejoicing therein, and much despised she them that were otherwise, and pitied them not, which pride god more abhorreth than the whoredom of any whore.

But it is not against such vehemence that we are required, within the play, to measure Isabella, rather against Mariana. Mariana has a very low profile in the play, but that we should not allow that to obscure her centrality. Whereas Isabella chooses to enter a nunnery, Mariana is forced into exile and isolation at her moated grange. Vienna cannot accommodate someone who refuses to accept its division of body from spirit, sex from love. Mariana has no compunction about making love to a man to whom she is not yet married, and the Duke not only sanctions but sets up the act. Mariana corresponds to Venus, a woman of candid sexuality defined entirely by her unconditional love for a man who rejects her, taking him to her bosom in the end after he has undergone a symbolic death and resurrection. Mariana represents, in almost token form, the values embodied much more explicitly and richly in Helena in *All's Well that Ends Well*. Her simple plea for Angelo's life has all the total commitment in love and charity which was lacking in Isabella's plea to Angelo. When Isabella sinks to her knees beside her and speaks in like terms, she recovers her humanity, and that, in the terms of this play, is the only redemption.

* * *

Hamlet will not step in blood without much scanning of the metaphysical dangers: 'And shall I couple hell?' Macbeth, the bloody soldier, does not lack resolution, but has the opposite imbalance:

> Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,
> Which must be acted, ere they may be scann'd. [III iv 138-9]

Macbeth has already, before the play begins, coupled hell by marrying Lady Macbeth. Marriage, which should be a creative and procreative bond, is, for Macbeth, his alliance with evil. Specifically, it represents his choice to reject the claims of love, pity and humanity, in favour of reputation, a reputation for valour which requires him to be as bloodthirsty as Pyrrhus:

> For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
> Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
> Which smok'd with bloody execution,

Like Valour's minion, carv'd out his passage,
Till he fac'd the slave;
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops,
And fix't his head upon our battlements. [I ii 16-22]

Macdonwald is described as

Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
The multiplying villainies of nature
Do swarm upon him. [I ii 10-12]

Macbeth himself is soon to learn what villainies multiply once mercy has been cast out. What Macbeth tries to stifle in himself is no less than his humanity, his soul, the essential feminine component in his psyche. And that violated component turns ugly and sits on his shoulder like an ape. It is Lady Macbeth. It is also Hecate in her ugliest guise, as Queen of Night and Hell. When Lady Macbeth invokes the 'murth'ring ministers' she is simply translating into an extreme form, ritualized as witchcraft, the unnatural values by which Macbeth already lives:

And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse;
That no compunctious visitings of Nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it! [I v 42-7]

In the language of Duncan and Banquo natural values are expressed in a natural imagery conspicuously absent from Macbeth's speeches. Dunsinane itself is fair:

This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,
By his loved mansionry, that the heaven's breath
Smells wooingly here [I vi 3-6]

and is associated by Duncan and Banquo with all things natural and creative:

no jutty, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
Hath made his pendent bed, and procreant cradle. [I vi 6-8]

But this fair is turned foul by Lady Macbeth:

The raven himself is hoarse,
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. [I v 38-40]

When his knife enters Duncan Macbeth makes indeed a 'breach in nature', severing a triple bond, the bond of kinsman, subject and host. The unnatural act troubles the whole natural world, as though 'Night's black agents' had flooded through the breach, overthrowing all natural law:

And Duncan's horses (a thing most strange and certain)
Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,
Turn'd wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,
Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would make
War with mankind.
'Tis said, they eat each other. [II iv 14-18]

But even more important is the bond of common humanity:

Come, seeling Night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful Day,
And, with thy bloody and invisible hand,
Cancel, and tear to pieces, that great bond
Which keeps me pale! [III ii 46-9]

Like Goneril Macbeth disbranches himself from his material sap, and consequently withers: 'my way of life / Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf'. This is exactly what the witches had set out to do: to drain him of the 'milk of human kindness':

I'll drain him dry as hay:
Sleep shall neither night nor day
Hang upon his penthouse lid
He shall live a man forbid. [I iii 18-21]

The more giant-like his tyranny, the more dwarfish his spirit.

Though Macbeth says, with Richard of Gloucester 'evil be thou my good', unlike Richard, he retains a clear sense of the distinction, of the value of the 'Good things of Day' to which he must relinquish his claim:

> And that which should accompany old age,
> As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
> I must not look to have. [V iii 24-6]

Grace itself is defined in similar homely terms:

> by the help of these (with Him above
> To ratify the work), we may again
> Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights,
> Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives,
> Do faithful homage, and receive free honours,
> All which we pine for now. [III vi 32-7]

Macbeth is fully aware of the destructive potential of the forces he conjures up to serve his ambition, of the risks he is taking with the whole future of the world:

> though the treasure
> Of Nature's germens tumble all together,
> Even till destruction sicken, answer me. [IV i 58-60]

But what makes him a tragic figure as Richard is not is that word 'treasure', a word from the vocabulary of Cordelia, not Lady Macbeth. It is no mere butcher who is so fully aware of the price he is paying: 'and mine eternal jewel / Given to the common enemy of man'.

Macbeth's ambition is not simply to wear the golden round himself, but to defeat time by founding a dynasty, an infinite succession of future kings. To do this, he must, of course, have a child; but in terms of the controlling symbolism of the play, their potential child is exactly what the Macbeths have killed. In dedicating herself to evil, Lady Macbeth calls the spirits to unsex her and take her milk for gall. Both the Macbeths associate pity with 'a naked new-born babe', Lady Macbeth with her own babe, which she would cheerfully pluck from her breast and dash the brains out. However many children she may

have had, she is, poetically, barren. And this imagery is later to erupt into the plot with the slaughter of all Macduff's pretty ones.

Far from defeating time, Macbeth has given himself as hostage to it:

> To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
> Creeps on this petty pace from day to day,
> To the last syllable of recorded time. [V v 19-21]

and the child he has ripped from the womb returns in the form of Macduff to put the rabid boar out of its misery.

* * *

Cleopatra is Shakespeare's first attempt to present the Goddess undivided. The division is entirely in Antony, for whom she is simultaneously the source of life and the destruction of all the (Roman) qualities by which he has hitherto defined himself and his manhood, so that, with Cleopatra, he 'is and is not Antony'. Of all Shakespeare's tragic heroes, Antony is the one who tries hardest to accept Venus in her totality, to respond appropriately to her unconditional love. But the division of the play between Egypt and Rome corresponds to the deep split which ultimately destroys him. Whenever he is in Egypt, his Roman self pulls at him, and when he is in Rome he longs to return to Egypt where his heart is. In Egypt Antony is valued as lover and gourmet and drinker in a context of peaceful conviviality. In Rome he is valued for his ability to withstand deprivation in a military context.

All values are aligned along this Rome/Egypt axis. Egypt is associated with pleasure, sport, holiday, excess, extravagance, intoxication, conviviality, the heart, and the life of the senses; Rome with pain, business, duty, discipline, austerity, care, factiousness, the head, and the life of calculation. It seems no compromise is possible; each of the opposites demands total commitment; each can be satisfied only at the expense of the other. Again it is a matter of negotiating 'the dangerous shores of will and judgement', or bestriding them like a colossus; but the chasm is too wide, even for Antony.

Rome makes its absolute demands, to which the Roman Antony responds: 'I have not kept my square, but that to come / Shall all be done by the rule' [II iii 6-7]. Rome is the world of the selfish, the realistic, the invulnerable, the public; its stage is history. Egypt is the world of generosity, imagination, timelessness; a world contained in the privacy of Cleopatra's bedroom. But Cleopatra has no sooner said: 'Eternity was in our lips, and eyes, / Bliss in our

brows' bent' than Antony interrupts with: 'The strong necessity of time commands / Our services awhile' [I iii 35-43].

Translated into sets, costumes and imagery, these opposites become the ground-pattern of the play's meanings. Egypt is a place of mystery, strangeness, infinite possibilities; Rome of that which is fixed, known, predictable, calculable. The Nile is the source of all life forms, but the Tiber is merely a river on which to launch warships. Rome is aggressively male, Egypt seductively female. Antony in Egypt is seen from Rome as effeminate. Cleopatra appeals to (in both senses) and corresponds with a part of Antony, his anima, the feminine, sensitive, loving, creative side of his nature; a side utterly scorned by the values of Rome, values we have inherited.

Rome is a secular civilization (at least as Shakespeare presents it), without roots, and dedicated to conquering others. It had moved far from the nature- and fertility-religion still practiced in Egypt, where the annual renewal of life depended on that great serpent-mother, the Nile. Wilson Knight gives a long list of birds and aquatic creatures mentioned in Egypt, suggesting the iterrelatedness and sacredness of all forms of life. [*Imperial Theme* 228]. The only non-human creature associated with the Romans is the war-horse - Nature subdued and disciplined to human destructive purposes. Egypt is associated with water and fruitfulness, Rome with land and sterility. In Egypt Antony is valued for his phallus, in Rome for his sword.

Antony cannot rid himself of Caesar, yet is continually thwarted and crossed by him. It is not, in Antony, as in Hamlet, that the opposing elements cancel each other out, producing stalemate, inaction. Rather, Antony oscillates between them, like a ship at the mercy of the tides, alternating between actions motivated by his Roman self (his military triumphs) and his 'Egyptian' self (his sensual riots). He cannot long be satisfied with either the Roman or the Egyptian definition of himself. Each denies and violates half of him. When Rome comes to Egypt in the form of his alter ego Caesar, he has to attempt to be general and lover, Roman and Egyptian, simultaneously. For one glorious moment it seems that he has succeeded:

> Lord of lords,
> O infinite virtue, com'st thou smiling from
> The world's great snare uncaught? [IV viii 16-18]

But not even Antony is capable of infinite virtue.

Antony calls Cleopatra 'my serpent of old Nile'. This should not be registered as a mere tease about her wiliness. It is an image which reverberates

throughout the play, and becomes part of a whole pattern of related images. It is from this pattern of images, as in all Shakespeare's mature plays, that the deepest meanings of the play, the symbolic or mythic meanings, emerge.

Of all the symbols of ancient Egyptian mythology, the serpent is perhaps the most common and important. At the beginning of the world, the Primordial Snake held all subsequent creation in its folds. It was identified with the Great Goddess, mother of all things. In Egyptian hieroglyphic script the sign for goddess was a rearing cobra. Having neither arms nor legs, the snake seemed to belong not to the animal world, but to a world primeval, even further from the human world. Serpents lived in the dark earth and the depths of the water. They symbolized the energies and dark forces working below the world of appearances. They were worshipped as Water Gods and fertility spirits. The Nile itself, on which the fertility of Egypt depended, was itself a great winding serpent. They were thought to possess the secrets of a lost ancient wisdom. But as gods came to displace goddesses, as Osiris became more important than Isis and became a city rather than an agricultural god, the uncanny forces symbolized by the snake came to be more feared than revered.

The symbolic significance of serpents is much the same in other mythologies. The snake is probably the oldest, commonest and most potent of all theriomorphic images. It is found in Neolithic cultures, where it is also identified with the goddess. The snake is a symbol of vitality and fertility - of life flowing serpentine within all living things, the waters under the earth, the sap of plants, the blood of animals. The snake's ability to renew itself by sloughing its skin suggested the annual renewal of the earth itself. To the early Greeks these limbless, featureless, rapid, vital strips of animate earth or zigzags of the energy of the universe, were not just symbols of but embodiments of *zoë*, raw, undifferentiated life. The snake was sacred to Dionysos, and to Asklepios, god of healing and renewal.

There was also a deeper serpent symbolism which was esoteric, forbidden knowledge. Persephone, in some versions of the myth of her annual descent into the underworld, became a serpent as a bride for the Great Serpent Hades, so that the coupling of serpents came to symbolize the power of life to renew itself. Thus the heart of Nature's mystery was symbolized for the Greeks by the double helix of a pair of entwined mating serpents.

The snake was so closely associated with the goddess that when, throughout Europe and the Near East, worship of the goddess was overthrown by the emerging patriarchal religions, the snake inevitably went down with her. Marduk slaughtered the serpent-goddess Tiamat. The great female goddesses,

even Earth herself, were rapidly declining in importance. When the role of the male in procreation became known, the shape of the snake and its ability to erect itself suggested the fertilizing phallus of the goddess' consort. Thus when the goddess herself ceased to be depicted as a serpent, the serpent continued to be depicted alongside her. But in later ages such images came to be reinterpreted, according to ideological prejudice or conditioning, often with exactly the opposite meaning. There is, for example, the image of a male and female being on either side of a flourishing tree. Associated with the female is a serpent. Originally, the image was interpreted as the Great Goddess, Mother of All Things, through whom the life force (the serpent) becomes the fertile world (Tree of Life). Chief among her creations is the male, who now, as her consort, honours and balances her. The same image appearing in Judeo-Christian culture is interpreted as sinful Eve being seduced by the evil serpent to taste the forbidden fruit and betray her consort, thus spoiling the perfect world which had sprung from the mind of God.

> The serpent is the first to receive Yahweh's curse: 'Upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life...' (Gen. 3:14). No longer is he to be the ever-rising sap of the Tree of Life, supreme among all others; now he is cursed above cattle and every beast of the field. His former vertical posture, as it would seem in the light of later developments, has been appropriated. ... [A] serpent of brass stood in the temple of Jerusalem, together with the Asherah, or image of the Mother Goddess, for about 200 years, until King Hezekiah 'did what was right in the sight of the Lord' (2 Kgs. 18:3). [Baring 500]

The snake is now the Universal Enemy and, through the woman, the origin of all evil.

At the time of Cleopatra, the Goddess had already been dethroned and degraded in Europe and much of the near East, but not yet in Egypt. Nowhere had the process of dematrification gone further than in Rome, a patriarchal society dedicated to the masculine and militaristic virtues of conquest, domination, discipline, efficiency, and every kind of rigidity. To such an extent were all things feminine repressed, including the feminine element in the male psyche, that love was reduced to either the legalistic, in which form it became part of the economic and political structure, or the erotic, in which form it was part of the warrior hero's permitted relaxation, like heavy drinking. Actual women are thus allowed only two roles, either dutiful wife or exciting whore. All conception of the sacred wholeness of the goddess as source of life and

death was lost. Octavius would put the goddess in a cage as a public entertainment.

Shakespeare probably knew little of Egyptian mythology. His immediate source, Plutarch, gives barely a hint of it. Yet it was not necessary for Shakespeare to know any mythology in order to make effective and mythologically accurate use in *Antony and Cleopatra* of serpent imagery and such related images as water and mud, for these images are archetypes, that is to say, images which have always occurred with much the same charge of meaning, in widely different cultures, independently of time and place, in dreams, visions, drug-induced hallucinations, and in the imaginations of poets. Serpents, for example, are so common in myths because they are an essential part of the symbolic language of the human psyche. And what they symbolize is life-giving female energies suppressed by the hubristic male intellect into the cellars of the mind, there to turn at last poisonous and destructive in response to rejection and persecution.

In the opening lines Antony's 'dotage' is expressed in terms of Mars disarmed by Venus. Mars stands for the absoluteness of manhood as defined in military terms, and Venus for the absoluteness of womanhood and the claims of love. Each needs the other, and each destroys the other. As Cleopatra triumphs, the god Hercules leaves Antony, and leaves him broken. Nothing in Roman mythology can put him together again, restore his integrity. He dies in disgrace and in error, bungling even his suicide. Cleopatra is , finally, very like Venus at the end of *Venus and Adonis*. The man she loves has been unable to meet the demands of her love. His betrayal of her draws out the destructive side of her nature, turns her serpent power to poison. But I am clearly not describing here the end of the play as we have it; rather, how the play might have ended had it been written in the spirit of *Troilus and Cressida*.

Cleopatra is Venus only in fancy dress, as a tribute to Antony and the mythology he is familiar with. Her real mythic significance emerges from her native Egyptian mythology, where she is, as she herself claims, Isis, mother of the gods, and wife of the god-king fertility hero Osiris, whose fate is to be torn apart, then reintegrated through her. But the Romans no longer recognized the absolute divinity of the great goddess; in their consciousness, as in the Judaic and the Christian, she had become the great whore. In their terms, Cleopatra is no more than a gypsy and a strumpet. Sylvia B. Perera writes:

> Most of the powers once held by the goddesses have lost their connection to women's life: the embodied, playful, passionately erotic feminine; the powerful, independent, self-willed feminine; and the ambitious, regal,

> many-sided feminine. ... Thus constricted, the joy of the feminine has been denigrated as mere frivolity, her joyful lust demeaned as whorishness, or sentimentalized and maternalized, her vitality channelled into duty and obedience.

Cleopatra is the magical doorway into life. Wilson Knight says of her:

> In Shakespeare woman is both the divine ideal and the origin of evil: because she is more eternal than man, more mysterious, the mysterious origin of life. On that dualism the past agonies revolve. Woman, rather than man, is the creative essence, the one harmony, from which man is separated, to which he aspires. On her ultimate serenity and sweetness, not denying but overswamping her evil, depends the sanity of religion, and the universal beauty. [op.cit.316-17]

Though we, like Shakespeare, must find heart more attractive than head, Egypt more attractive than Rome, Cleopatra than Caesar, Shakespeare by no means devalues Antony's military exploits, nor does he always glamorize his erotic life. It is glamorous, almost divine in its excess, but it is also, simultaneously, reducible to a matter of drunkenness and gaudy nights. Antony himself, at his lowest point, utters the play's strongest condemnation of it:

> the wise gods seal our eyes;
> In our own filth dip our clear judgements; make us
> Adore our errors; laugh at's, while we strut
> To our confusion. [III xiii 112-15]

In *Troilus and Cressida* that would have been the last word, but it is not here. In spite of the worst that can be said against it, there is also a sense, which grows throughout the play, in which Cleopatra mysteriously redeems what to Roman consciousness is most vile:

> For vilest things
> Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
> Bless her, when she is riggish. [II ii 238-40]

Joyful lust is sacred.

After his death, Cleopatra is able to substitute for the torn Antony a regenerate man embodying the wholeness he never achieved in life, a man

whose capacity for fullness and joy in life integrates human life with that of the non-human world and triumphs over death:

> For his bounty,
> There was no winter in't: an autumn 'twas
> That grew the more by reaping: his delights
> Were dolphin-like, they show'd his back above
> The element they lived in. [V ii 86-90]

We now recognize over a hundred elements. In Shakespeare's day there were, and had been since the early Greeks, only four, earth, air, fire and water. Earth and water were regarded as gross elements which bound the nature of man to that of beasts. Air and fire were refined and linked man's composition to that of the spirits. The orthodox attitude, supported by Christianity, was that men should disown and suppress their grosser elements and do all they could to express only the finer. But there were those, including Shakespeare, who believed that man's task was rather to achieve a balance, a harmony of the potentially discordant elements of which he was composed; and that to fail to do so was to give oneself as a hostage to fate.

To the male intellect which aspires to a life all air and fire (that is renown and conquest), earth and water, the dominion of the serpent, are spurned as mere mud from which men have painfully dragged themselves (rising above women in the process), and Antony's lapse is a disgusting slide back into man's first slime. But Cleopatra looks back on Antony in his brief moment of perfect balance as a dolphin, simultaneously a creature of air and water.

Life is no longer in this play seen as a doomed battle against 'injurious time' and oblivion. Shakespeare's understanding of Egyptian religion, or the meaning with which he invests it for the purposes of this play, is very close to the meaning of Etruscan religion as Lawrence deduced it from the tomb-paintings:

> In the tombs we see it; throes of wonder and vivid feeling throbbing over death. Man moves naked and glowing through the universe. Then comes death: he dives into the sea, he departs into the underworld. ... But the sea the people knew. The dolphin leaps in and out of it suddenly, as a creature that suddenly exists, out of nowhere. He was not: and lo! there he is! The dolphin which gives up the sea's rainbows only when he dies. Out he leaps; then, with a head-dive, back again he plunges into the sea. He is so

> much alive, he is like the phallus carrying the fiery spark of procreation down into the wet darkness of the womb. The diver does the same, carrying like a phallus his small hot spark into the deeps of death. And the sea will give up her dead like dolphins that leap out and have the rainbow within them. [*Mornings in Mexico* 150-1]

Thus the sea gave up the dead Osiris to Isis in search.

Historically, the Romans did accuse the life-loving Etruscans of sexual viciousness. The Romans aspired to clear judgements in their doomed masculine pursuit of perfection. In Egypt nothing is clear, everything muddied, for their life is complete and does not disown its miraculous origins in the slime:

> The higher Nilus swells,
> The more it promises: as it ebbs, the seedsman
> Upon the slime and ooze scatters his grain,
> And shortly comes to harvest. [II vii 20-3]

This is the context in which Cleopatra envisages her death, as preferable to life in Rome:

> Rather a ditch in Egypt
> Be gentle grave unto me, rather in Nilus' mud
> Lay me stark-nak'd, and let the water-flies
> Blow me into abhorring. [V ii 57-60]

Cleopatra here becomes the Black Goddess, as in Peter Redgrove's poem 'The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach', where 'the mud spatters with rich seed and raging pollens' as the white woman enters black mud for earth's blessing. And the abhorrent crawling things, as the Ancient Mariner was to discover, are also sacred.

As in all tragedy the ending is a mixture of positive and negative elements. In terms of that part of our consciousness (and Shakespeare's) which regards death as final, we might say that no creative marriage has been possible in life between the mighty opposites of Rome and Egypt. Cleopatra, the Divine Mother, puts to her breast not a baby but an asp. Instead of milk flowing from her breast poison flows into it. Yet death cannot negate what the play has in human terms affirmed: that, in the last analysis, living one's life, participating in the life-processes of eating and drinking and making love and having

children and relating to other people and to the non-human world in a spirit of joy is more important than any amount of power and conquest and male self-glorification; that to uphold such values is not simply play or childishness or effeminacy, but requires a total commitment, a willingness to sacrifice a great deal for it, and the final recognition that death is not a defeat and an ending, but another of nature's sacred processes; that participation in it can be a triumph and a blessing.

Having committed themselves to each other, and to a 'better life' in death, Antony and Cleopatra, like Lear and Cordelia in prison, are lifted into an almost godlike spiritual condition (symbolized by Cleopatra lifting the dying Antony to the top of her monument), from which vantage point it can be seen that Caesar is paltry, 'an ass unpolicied', and all things political are dwarfed into insignificance.

By the time we reach the ending the reader sensitive to the imagery has been conditioned to recognize also a mythic plane of meaning on which death is by no means final. Antony calls to Cleopatra to stay for him:

> Where souls do couch on flowers, we'll hand in hand,
> And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze:
> Dido, and her Aeneas, shall want troops
> And all the haunt be ours. [IV xiv 50-4]

Unconsciously, Antony reunites the abandoned queen with her betrayer in the Elysian Fields, where Aeneas is given a second chance to accept Dido's unconditional love. 'I will be a bridegroom in my death' [IV xiv 100] is taken up by Cleopatra: 'Husband, I come: / Now to that name, my courage prove my title!' [V ii 286-7]. She claims the title not only of bride, but also of mother: : 'Dost thou not see my baby at my breast, / That sucks the nurse asleep?' [V ii 308-9]. (One of the several Egyptian serpent-headed goddesses, Renenet, was the goddess of suckling.) Behind the final tableau stands Isis giving new life to the dead Osiris and giving birth to his son Horus who will grow to be the renewed Osiris. The Goddess is able at last to achieve her completeness assuming those aspects denied her by Rome, and, until now, by Antony - Divine Mother and Sacred Bride.

Hughes traces in detail Antony's role as Osiris to Cleopatra's Isis. Here is his account of the ending:

> What now remains, for this Osirian Antony, is for him to free himself, wholly and finally, from that obsolete Herculean Roman Antony, and

> emerge as his true self, the universal love god, consort of the Goddess of Complete Being, in so far as that can be incarnated in the body of the middle-aged Roman warrior, lover of a middle-aged, reckless, fearful queen.... While the drama portrays the self-destruction of the great Roman Antony on the tragic plane, it becomes, on the transcendental plane, a theophany, the liberation of Antony's Osirian Divine Love nature, under the 'magical' influence of the completeness of Cleopatra's. The play ... begins with the love god fully formed but unacknowledged, trapped within the self-ignorant, military Herculean *bon viveur*, who is still confidently wrestling for political control of the Roman world. It ends with the crushed, empty armour of the former Herculean warrior, like an empty chrysalis, while the liberated love god, like an iridescent new winged being, lies in the lap of the Goddess, his love 'total and unconditional', reunited beyond life and death (in the high tomb) with the adoring Goddess. [*Shakespeare* 316-7]

This image may seem less far-fetched when we think of Coriolanus dying in his belated attempt to emerge from the armoured chrysalis in which his mother has locked him, (she had no doubt tought him, as she now teaches his son, to mammock gilded butterflies); of the emergence of life from a coffin in *Pericles*; and from a stone statue in *The Winter's Tale*.